PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 355

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

COMPRISING PERIOD
23 October—2 November 2000

£70

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23 October 2000

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 355**

SEVENTEENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 23 October 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

THE RIGHT HON. SIR EDWARD HEATH *took the Chair, pursuant to Standing Order No. 1 (Election of the Speaker).*

Election of Speaker

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): I have to inform the House that Her Majesty, having been informed of the resignation of the right hon. Betty Boothroyd, lately Speaker of this House, gives leave to the House to proceed forthwith to the election of a new Speaker.

Sir Edward Heath (Old Bexley and Sidcup): The House may be assisted if I make a short statement about the procedure this afternoon. The first business of the House must be to elect a Speaker. Under Standing Order No. 1, whenever it is necessary to proceed forthwith to the choice of a Speaker, it falls to the Member with the longest continuous service in the House to preside. It is also laid down that when a motion has been made that a certain Member do take the Chair, further nominations are to be made in the form of amendments to that motion.

The Standing Order therefore means that all I can preside over is the election of a Speaker by the means laid down in the Standing Order. Although that procedure may sound complex, it is exactly the same as that adopted by the House in deciding on any motion to which amendments are offered. First, the motion is moved. If there are amendments, they are then moved and decided on. Once an amendment has been carried, the main question, as amended, is put to the House for decision. If no amendment is carried and no more are forthcoming, the main question is put for decision. I hope that that will be helpful.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Sir Edward, you and I have sat under eight Speakers in 15 Parliaments over 50 years, and you know, better than any of us, the importance of the Speaker to the work of Parliament. We are in some difficulty today. We do not know the names of the candidates because they have never been put on the Order Paper. We do not know who will move them or second them. We did not know what statement you would make until you made it. Officially, we will not know of any proposal of the kind that I hope you will allow me to make until I have the chance to make it.

I draw your attention, Sir Edward, to paragraph (3) of Standing Order No. 1, which says:

A Member taking the chair—

that is yourself, Sir Edward—

under the provisions of paragraph (1) of this order shall enjoy all those powers which may be exercised by the Speaker during proceedings . . .

Therefore you have absolute power, as the Speaker has, to accept an amendment if you choose to do so.

I am not asking you, Sir Edward, to support the proposal, but the House should have the opportunity to do so. There was very wide consultation at a meeting this morning and out of 150 people, only one was opposed to the idea of a ballot. We are a sovereign body, and when the House wishes it can pass an Act though both Houses in a single day and get Royal Assent, and there is no reason why we should not tackle the question now.

The Clerk advises me that the form of words that I should use in making my proposal are as follows:

That notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 1 (Election of Speaker), the process of nomination and election shall be as follows:

(a) That nominations for the position of Speaker be opened immediately and be submitted to the Clerk of the House, each one to be supported by a Mover and Seconder and accompanied by a consent form signed by each person nominated.

(b) That Ballot papers be printed immediately containing the names of all the nominated candidates together with the names of the movers and seconders of each.

(c) That each Mover and Seconder be then invited to speak in support in support of their candidate, in alphabetical order by name of that candidate, followed by others who may wish to speak and ending with the candidates themselves also in alphabetical order.

(d) That the House then adjourn to allow ballot papers to be issued in the No Lobby and members having marked them with the name of the person for whom they wish to vote, signed with their own names, would then place them in Ballot Boxes in the Aye Lobby.

(e) That the Clerk of the House would act as the Returning Officer for the counting of the Votes and would report the result to the Father of the House showing the votes cast for each candidate and the names of those members who had voted for each.

(f) That the House would proceed to a division to decide which of the two candidates with the largest number of votes would become Speaker.

(g) The successful candidate would then take the Chair as Speaker Elect in the normal way.

I am not suggesting that that is a perfect system—some Members have suggested alternative votes and exhaustive ballots—but it is practical.

I have given the Clerk nomination forms and ballot papers and know that he has prepared them in case the proposal is carried. I hope that you, Sir Edward, will allow the House to decide. The House must have the Speaker it wants and the Speaker must enjoy the authority that he or she needs to do the job that we are about to elect him or her to do.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): May I support the point of view put by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn)? This is the most important vote that the House faces in this Parliament, and two arguments have been put against altering the procedure in the way that he suggests. One is that there has been a previous opportunity to do so and that the Procedure Committee has considered that. However, I am quite sure that the Procedure Committee did not consider the possibility of there being 12 candidates and the complexity that we face, so that we now have to make a game theory decision on who we vote for at each point.

The second argument is that we should not change the rules midway through a contest. Probably the House was surprised when Speaker Boothroyd chose to stand down—disappointed, perhaps, as well—but it seems to me that it is more important that the House can choose by a transparent and visibly fair procedure that it supports overwhelmingly rather than stick with an antiquated procedure, which would bring the House into disrepute.

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): May I support the proposal made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn)? We are about to take a momentous decision and I urge you, Sir Edward, not to go down the route of antiquated precedent but, rather, to abide by what I think is a substantial majority in the House who support your allowing us to have a free, fair, open and democratic ballot.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Sir Edward. As someone who does not support this last-minute change to the rules, may I seek your guidance for those of us who are prepared to stick with the existing rules until they are properly changed? I ask you to guide the House as to your thoughts on the sequence in which you propose to put the main proposition and, more important, the amendments. Some indication of that would help those of us who wish to give consideration to the votes that we are about to cast.

Sir Edward Heath: I should like to deal with the point that has just been raised, among others. I quite understand the anxiety that many Members have about the present system. I not only understand but have considerable sympathy with it. On the other hand, I believe that my powers under the Standing Order do not extend to presiding over a debate and a decision on other possible methods of election. In any case, even if I had the authority to act in that way, I believe that we would become very confused if we tried to change the rules in the middle of our proceedings. However, as I am sympathetic to the concern of Members, there may be a way in which I can help without straining the limits of my powers.

It may assist the House if I announce in advance the order in which I shall call Members to propose candidates—that is, the order of all those who have notified me that they wish to take part in the debate. I do so with two provisos. First, if any amendment is carried and the main question as amended thereafter is agreed to, no subsequent amendments can be proposed. Secondly, the list that I am about to read out is not necessarily exhaustive. If no amendment moved by a Member whose name is on the list is carried, other Members may catch my eye to put forward other candidates. Perhaps I may now give the list of those who have notified me already.

I will first call Mr. Snape to move that Mr. Martin do take the Chair. That will be seconded and debated. Thereafter, we may proceed to other candidates. Mr. Winnick is to propose, as an amendment, Sir Alan Haselhurst; Mr. Wigley is to propose, again as an amendment, Mr. Beith; Mr. David Davis is similarly to propose Mrs. Dunwoody; Mr. MacGregor is to propose Sir George Young; Mr. O'Neill is to propose Mr. Menzies Campbell; Mr. Maxton is to propose Dr. David Clark; Mr. Wilkinson is to propose Mr. Nicholas Winterton; Mr. Cann is to propose Mr. McWilliam; Mr. Tom King is to propose Mr. Lord; Mrs. Shephard is to propose Sir Patrick Cormack; and Mr. Martin Bell is to propose Mr. Shepherd. That covers all those who have notified me of their wish to speak.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Notwithstanding the statement that you have just made, Sir Edward, I hope that you recognise that when the procedures of the House do not even reflect the views of its Members, let alone those who send us here, we have a problem.

As the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) said, the Procedure Committee examined the question following the previous election of a Speaker in 1992. I was a member of the Procedure Committee. It was then thought inappropriate to examine the issue soon after a large majority had elected the Speaker—the bulk of the House voted in that Division. I put it to you, Sir Edward, that it is always an inappropriate time to do so; it is no more inappropriate today than it was then. Indeed, we all have a collective responsibility for not examining the issue at the time. Even the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), who spoke in the previous debate, did not raise questions about the procedure.

This time, it is clearly the view of the House that the procedure that we are about to follow is not likely to result in a clear statement. Even if we proceed as you have indicated, Sir Edward, we are likely to leave a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration in the House, whoever is elected. I know that I will not be popular with whoever takes the Chair some time this afternoon—or, perhaps, in the early hours of the morning—but I still believe it is important that we review the procedure.

We are fortunate that we are likely to be back in the Chamber electing a Speaker following the dissolution of Parliament in a matter of months, so the appointment is a temporary one. I hope that, during that period, the House will agree that my colleagues on the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons should be given a remit to look again at the procedures and make them more democratic.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): Usually, I support my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), and I do so on this occasion with one proviso.

We are approaching the season of gunpowder, treason and plot, as always at this time of the year. I estimate that as many as 100 Members of Parliament, including Ministers, cannot be present but ought to be aware of any proposed change to the procedure. I know of at least three Ministers who have had to go abroad on Government business and very much regret that they cannot be present.

There is no proxy vote; there is no pairing system; there is nothing on the Order Paper; and nothing has come from the Whips to say that the change will be made or the debate will be held. There has been no indication other than my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield's rising to his feet. Making such a change would be out of order in any other parliamentary business. Suddenly, the House, ad hoc, says that it is going to debate and vote on the issue. I put it to you, Sir Edward, that that would be out of order. We should carry on and debate any changes later.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): On a point of order, Sir Edward. I believe that there is almost certainly a majority in the House now in favour of a change in the rules to allow the ballot to go ahead on a fully democratic basis. That being the case, and although you have said that you are not permitted to allow a debate and a vote to take place on the proposal of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), we in this House make our own rules: Standing Orders exist only to guide us. Therefore, I should like to move that we set aside Standing Order No. 1 until the House has had an opportunity to arrive at a view and vote on the right hon. Gentleman's proposal.

Sir Edward Heath: I must tell the hon. Gentleman that such a motion requires notice.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Sir Edward. May I ask you a question of fact? On what basis and by what criteria was the sequence of names decided?

Sir Edward Heath: It was done at my discretion. That has always been the case, but my predecessors have never announced in advance who has been chosen and where they are placed. I was hoping that my doing so would be helpful to the House.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): On a point of order, Sir Edward. It is indeed helpful for the House to know the order in which you will call the candidates, and it is, of course, open to you to use your discretion. However, the problem with comparing today's procedures with those over which your predecessors presided is that they are not comparable—today, the House faces an unprecedented number of contenders for the speakership. That is why I support the proposal made by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) that, because we face an unprecedented situation, the House itself should control the way in which this extremely important matter is handled.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): On a point of order, Sir Edward. We know that you are in an extremely difficult position, but, on the important issue facing us today, it would be entirely wrong to go ahead on the stated basis when it is quite clear that the majority of the House is not in favour of doing so. [HON. MEMBERS: "No!"] Some Members say no, but let us put it to the test and have a vote on the proposal of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn).

If you cannot do that, Sir Edward, I put it to you that when the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), resigned on the lawn of No. 10 Downing street, several points of order were raised and it was ruled from the Chair that it was in order to move, as an emergency resolution, That this House do now adjourn. Would it be possible to move such a motion in the event of your not allowing the House to divide on the proposal of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield?

Sir Edward Heath: I am sorry, but I am not prepared to accept a dilatory motion; I am sure that the House as a whole does not want that.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): On a point of order, Sir Edward. You control the batting order, which is crucial, and you have read out the names of the candidates and those who are proposing them, but I am none the wiser as to what informed that decision. You say that you have discretion; indeed you do, and that is what is wrong with the system of election. The system we use should be open and transparent, and people here and outside should be able to understand it.

An hour or so ago, we held hustings in Committee Room 10. We carried out a straw poll among the approximately 150 Members present, the result of which was an almost unanimous decision—there was one exception—that there should be a ballot of the candidates. People do not want to elect the new Speaker using a discredited system that would not have been out of place in eastern Europe before the wall came down.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): On a point of order, Sir Edward. I suggest that we are confronted with a matter of principle. It is also a matter of democracy. Further, it is a matter that unites Members on both sides of the House. It is important, too, that the people who are looking in on our proceedings—those who send us here—understand and recognise the way in which we comport ourselves in this place, which should conform to their understanding of democracy.

I urge you to accept, Sir Edward, that it cannot be in conformity with the spirit of the Standing Orders that you intend to operate this afternoon that we should elect the champion of Back Benchers and the champion of the House through a system of smoke and mirrors. That person could not expect to command either the respect or authority following such an election. I urge you to think again, Sir Edward, and to bear in mind the fact that almost

[Mr. Peter Bradley]

unanimously those who have spoken this afternoon would urge you to ensure that we have a free, open, democratic and accountable form of election.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I would not go as far as the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) and say that there is a majority either for or against what you have proposed, Sir Edward, or for or against what the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) has proposed. It has become clear to me over the past 20 minutes that the House is deeply divided on the matter. I have no idea where the majority lies, but, given the fact that the House is divided, there is a real risk that unless the House expresses where its majority lies, whatever system we use will undermine the very person that we must not undermine when we come to choose the next Speaker.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I agree with the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire). You tried to be helpful, Sir Edward, by announcing the batting order for the candidates, but, far from being helpful, it will undoubtedly mean that this afternoon's proceedings will cause more of a problem.

Both you, Sir Edward, and the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) have two last duties to perform on behalf of the nation and this Parliament. The right hon. Gentleman has given you the opportunity to listen to what the House is saying and to accept that his proposition is made in the right sense, will result in the right decision and will enable the right person to occupy the Chair. I fear that anything short of that will seriously undermine the credibility of the successful candidate.

There will be many in the House and outside who will not understand why we have come to the decision that we have. The only sensible way forward is to accept the proposition of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield, listen to what the House is saying and at least test whether the right hon. Gentleman, for once, is speaking for the whole House and for the majority of the country.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): If there were ever a sitting of this place that needed prayers before it, this is surely it. I hope to have an opportunity to propose the name of the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). As he is 12th in the batting order, I fear that it is unlikely that I shall be able to do so. As we should be a model of democracy, can we not now choose a democratic procedure for the election of Speaker?

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On a point of order, Sir Edward. It strikes me that anyone who comes through the process this afternoon under our current rules will have the support of the House. The problem is that with a plethora of candidates it is extremely likely that we shall arrive at a point when there are no more amendments to be made, and the main motion may be lost. That may be the situation, given the number of candidates. If at that stage it was clear that we could then re-examine the rules, the House could then adjourn. Is that a potential way forward?

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): On a point of order, Sir Edward. There is no doubt that the House is master of its own procedure. It is therefore open to you, under Standing Order No. 1, to accept the proposal in the name of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). There is plainly a great deal of support for it, even if there is also a good deal of opposition. May I ask you, Sir Edward, to accept the proposal and put it to the test?

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): I am probably unique in that I am the only candidate who has withdrawn. However, that leaves 12 other candidates to be proposed and seconded.

The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) had the courtesy to telephone to discuss his proposal with me, and I have a great deal of sympathy with it. The only problem that occurs to me—from a dispassionate point of view, as I now have—is that under his proposal, the two leading candidates could, even together, receive only minority support in the House. We might have two significant minority candidates going forward to the final selection. That does not seem a suitable solution, so we may have to consider a system of additional vote, which I would not normally support, but it seems that even the proposition of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield is flawed.

Sir Edward Heath: Some of the complications of the proposed system are now emerging clearly. For us to go over to a new system will take considerable time and a great deal of investigation. What has been proposed so far as a simple solution is not simple at all. On the other hand, providing the names of those who wish to be considered and their proposers and seconders, as I have done, gives the House far more information than it has ever had in the past and provides a foundation for taking decisions today. Therefore, I cannot accept the proposals that have been made from various quarters. We should get on with our business, and I call Mr. Snape to propose Mr. Martin.

2.58 pm

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): I beg to move,

That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

All of us present today recognise the importance of the matter before us, even if we cannot agree on the procedures. As elected Members of the House, we recognise the primacy of the occupant of the Chair and the formidable powers that we, by our decisions today, will grant to that person.

Many of us on both sides recognise that the power and status of the House have diminished considerably over the years. That process did not start in 1997 or even in 1974, when I was first elected. It has been going on for many years. All of us are aware of the feeling often expressed by our constituents that we are somehow out of touch and have no real knowledge of society's problem. To refute that premise is one of reasons that I urge colleagues on both sides of the House to support my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin) today, for understanding the problems of poverty and deprivation perhaps comes easier to my hon. Friend than to others.

My hon. Friend was born at the end of the second world war in a Glasgow tenement as one of the five children of a mother who faced life as a single parent after the break-up of the marriage, and following the awful experiences of a father who was three times torpedoed

during the second world war. My hon. Friend was an apprentice sheet metal worker before coming to the House, although he says that at the time he would have preferred to be a carpenter. Going to work as he did then, clad in a second-hand boiler suit and a pair of boots, gives him a deep knowledge of some of the problems facing many of our electors and many people in the United Kingdom. Although I am glad that his sartorial awareness has improved since those days, his experiences are not ones that can readily be put aside.

My hon. Friend was elected to the old Glasgow corporation in 1973. It is understandable, given his own experiences, that the provision of decent housing was his major political passion. My hon. Friend helped to form a housing association in the city that is one of the biggest community-based associations in Glasgow today.

Since being elected to the House in 1979, my hon. Friend has served on many of the House's Committees. All hon. Members know that much of the work of those Committees is unreported, unheralded and unobserved by a media obsessed with plots, counter-plots, trivia and tittle-tattle. As Chairman of the Administration Committee in the last Parliament, my hon. Friend knows that the duties and responsibilities of the Chairman lie outside as well as inside the Chamber.

My hon. Friend insisted that proper child care facilities were provided in the building for the many members of our staff who have child care responsibilities. Some hon. Members may believe that that is not the main or even a primary responsibility of the Speaker. *[Interruption.]* "Hear, hear" say some of the chauvinists opposite. Many Labour Members believe that the provision of proper child care for the staff of the House is no less a responsibility of the Speaker than any other. *[Interruption.]* Well, Opposition Members need not listen if they do not want to, but they will have to hear me in the end. Thanks largely to my hon. Friend's efforts, the Parliamentary Commissioner approved a voucher scheme to provide child care in the House.

Hon. Members who have come to the House comparatively recently know how confusing it all too often is. Although we talk about training and modernisation, we leave many new Members to find out what goes on for themselves. My hon. Friend's consideration for others, his fairness when occupying the Chair as Deputy Speaker and his willingness to assist us all with advice and guidance have convinced me and many of my colleagues of his attributes.

There has been much press comment on our procedures today. Doubtless there will be even more tomorrow. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) has already given his view of our proceedings. It sometimes seems that no proceedings are complete without a dissenting view from my right hon. Friend. As one of his great admirers for all the years that I have been here, I tell him that he has had almost 50 years as a Member of Parliament to change some of those procedures. I concede that he has been distracted by his membership of many Labour Governments during that time, but it seems that every time a procedural matter arises, my right hon. Friend, albeit adroitly and lucidly, finds some reason for us not to proceed.

The candidature of my hon. Friend the Member for Springburn has not been without criticism from the press, anxious as always to give us their opinions. On Sunday, one distinguished scribe claimed that my hon. Friend, by his action as Chairman of the Administration Committee in banning unaccompanied journalists from the Terrace, had

> prevented journalists from buying hon. Members a drink.

If that were true, it would be a very serious matter. My hon. Friend's actions actually prevented them from buying each other drink. He perhaps also inadvertently prevented them from putting the wrong name on their expense accounts when they got back to the office.

My hon. Friend would agree that, while preserving the best of our traditions, we need to modernise some of our procedures. The sight and sound of the occupants of the Chair announcing at 11.30 pm, "the Ayes to the right: 245; the Noes to the left: 3," convinces many people outside that we need our heads examining for behaving in such a manner. Such behaviour does nothing to convince the people of this country that we are a 21st century Administration, and that the House is capable of updating its procedures. No one wishes to stifle debate; indeed, it is usually the only weapon available to Back Benchers. However, we need a Speaker who will confront and change some of our more absurd practices.

My hon. Friend continually demonstrates his even temper, calmness and gentle humour. Occasionally, when hon. Members get carried away, his oft-used phrases, such as "The hon. Gentleman should know better" or even "It's no' nice", have calmed hon. Members, as well as bringing smiles all round. My hon. Friend is held in respect and affection on both sides of the House. His apprenticeship as Deputy Speaker has demonstrated his skill and ability. I commend his candidature to the House.

3.5 pm

Ann Keen (Brentford and Isleworth): Since my election in 1997, I have always regarded it as an honour to address the House, but today it is even more so, as I rise to second my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin). It is easy for new Members to be over-awed by the House, and I am only one of many hon. Members elected at that time who were made to feel more at ease and valued because of my hon. Friend's patience, understanding and, of course, knowledge.

One of the first things that I did when asked to second my hon. Friend's nomination was to read the report of the election that took place in 1992. There are few with greater experience and knowledge of parliamentary procedures than my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). That has most certainly been demonstrated today. I hope that he does not mind that I shall refer to the contribution that he made at the election of the Speaker in 1992. He said that it was the first task of the new Parliament to elect a Speaker. The disadvantage at that time was that the large number of new Members had not been able to enjoy the experience of judging the contenders' ability for that post.

Today, however, every Member has been able to witness the ability of my hon. Friend the Member for Springburn to calm the House, which frequently needs that ability, and to do so in such a way that helps all Members in difficulty rather than putting them down. He has always shown fairness to those holding different political views. He has also shown his loyalty to Parliament. That is why he has such large support today.

[Ann Keen]

In 1992, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield rightly asked for a Speaker who would not only chair proceedings in the Chamber, but look after the interests of the staff who work in the House and on whom we rely so heavily. Many of the staff, in more than one discipline, say that if they could do so they would support my hon. Friend the Member for Springburn. I believe that that is because they know that he respects them. He listens to them and they have confidence in him. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) referred to the introduction of child care vouchers. They are very important, and are appreciated by the staff of the House, but there is much more to do.

Finally, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield said in 1992 that he wanted Parliament to be a workshop, not a museum. I put it to the House that my hon. Friend the Member for Springburn fits that bill completely. He has served an apprenticeship as an engineer, a trade union official and, finally—most certainly—as a Deputy Speaker. He will ensure that the House is efficient. He will ensure that Back Benchers, the Opposition and minority parties are given their deserved rights in this workshop. He will ensure that this workshop is modernised. My hon. Friend has a record of representing the underprivileged. He has always had to work hard for improvement and change, and he will not stop doing so now. I am proud to second his nomination.

3.9 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I want to speak to the substantive motion and the principle behind it, rather than the amendment, which I shall deal with later if necessary.

I am sure that all the candidates would be impartial and totally fair in exercising their duties, but impartiality is not enough in the Speaker that we seek today. The powers of the House are widely considered to be in decline. That perception is real; history and politics have ensured that the House's powers are in decline. That decline must be arrested and reversed. That is the task of the person we elect today.

The balance of power between Parliament and the Executive has tipped against this House even more in recent years than the long-term trend would indicate. There is also a disparity of power between Front-Bench Members and Back-Bench Members of the House. Putting that disparity right is also a task of the Speaker whom we elect today.

The bypassing of Parliament is well understood. Ministers go to television studios or on the "Today" programme and announce matters before they appear before the House. A Speaker can do something about that. Private notice questions, applications under Standing Order No. 24, and the right of individuals to raise questions that could be debated in emergency by the House are all matters with which the Speaker can and should deal.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): What, even when the Tory Government were in power?

Mr. Davis: I shall shortly give way to the pensioner from Bolsover.

The disparity of power between Members on the Front Benches and those on the Back Benches has been very apparent in past years. Decisions are made on the timetabling of the business of the House. Many believe, with reason, that timetabling is a reasonable approach to the business of the House. This is just about the only House in the western world where such timetabling is done not by the Speaker but by the Executive. That practice has long been wrong—it was wrong under a Tory Government, just as it is under a Labour Government.

Many aspects of recent legislation have changed the rights of our citizens—the right to trial by jury, the right to freedom of information and to a number of other matters, including a passport. Those issues should be decided by the House, and a future Speaker should take that matter in hand.

My point is simple and short. I have said already that our candidates will all be fair, but they should also have strength, independence, integrity and a passionate commitment to the House of Commons. That is what we need from any candidate whom we elect today.

3.12 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I shall continue the theme that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) has introduced. This will be one of my last speeches in the House of Commons before I go into politics and, if I may, I want to put to the House my fears for this place. I do not attribute them to any one Government or any one Prime Minister, and I do not want that to be misunderstood.

The people who elect us to Parliament ask us certain questions. They ask, "When we go to war, do you have a say in it?" and the answer is that we do not. We were not consulted, in terms of a vote, about the bombing in Iraq or Kosovo—*[Interruption.]* No, statements were made. There was also Sierra Leone. That is a royal prerogative. We could not even start electing a Speaker without instructions from the Queen, so the royal prerogative is very strong.

Then we come to the laws made in Brussels. I have been on the Council of Ministers, and was its President once. When Ministers go to Brussels and agree to laws in secret, they repeal the laws that we have made and we have no say, either before the Minister goes or when he comes back.

Patronage is on a massive scale. Every Prime Minister has done it—almost 1,000 peers have been made by Prime Ministers since the war. There is no consultation with the House of Commons about the patronage exercised by the Prime Minister of the day. We must face the fact that we are, to a large extent, an impotent House of Commons. I can give a practical example of that. We have been in recess since July, and during that time there has been a fuel crisis, a Danish no vote, the collapse of the euro and a war in the middle east, but what is our business tomorrow? The Insolvency Bill *[Lords]*. It ought to be called the Bankruptcy Bill [*Commons*], because we play no role.

I am very concerned because many young people believe that this is an impotent Parliament. They go on the streets in Prague or Seattle rather than come to the Palace of Westminster, because we do not do the job that we were elected to do. We have a president, and we do not have a House of Representatives.

I fear that, in the world in which we live—I lay no blame at anyone's door, because that is not my purpose, certainly not during this period of my political life—globalisation means that multinational companies have much more power than countries. Ford is bigger than South Africa; Toyota is bigger than Norway. When I went to America last year to celebrate my golden wedding anniversary, I met an old Governor of Ohio, who said "You will never have democracy when big business buys both parties and expects a pay-off, whoever wins."

I believe that it is our job to reverse that. It is for the Commons to decide. Whoever becomes Speaker—I think all the candidates have qualities that they would bring to the job—we must use this period, that of the first Parliament of the 21st century, to restore the power of the people who elected us. We must not be content to be managed and to become a sort of audience, as if we were on the BBC's "Question Time".

For that reason, I hope that some part of the debate will go beyond the personal qualities of which we have heard from proposers and seconders, to the whole central question of whether the House of Commons can survive if it allows itself to be powerless in the face of the really big decisions that will influence the future of this country.

3.16 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I had not intended to speak, but I think that a mistake is creeping into the debate: a sense that, somehow, the future of the House depends either on the attitude of the Government or on the qualities of the Speaker. In fact, what the House's future depends on is the quality of Back Benchers. Because both—or all—the major parties are trying to tighten their control over the selection of candidates and the way in which they are preferred, and seeking above all this mythical quality of loyalty, individual Back Benchers are ceasing to feel able to say and do what they want.

I am a fine one to talk. I have been far too loyal to my party for far too long. As my impending retirement approached, however, I realised rather too late how much power an individual Back Bencher, or a group of individual Back Benchers, can exercise when using this place as it could be used. I regret that it took me so long to realise that, but I am a slow learner.

We must not fool ourselves into thinking that the future of the House depends either on some magic Zebedee of a Speaker leaping in to solve all its problems, or on some change of heart on the part of Governments, who will always try to control the House of Commons. What we need is a much clearer perception of what Back Benchers can and ought to achieve, and the fact that their prime loyalty is to their constituency associations and not to their parties.

Sir Edward Heath: The hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin) has been proposed and seconded. I now give him the opportunity to submit himself to the House.

3.18 pm

Mr. Michael J. Martin (Glasgow, Springburn): I submit myself to the House, and welcome you to the Chair, Sir Edward. Certainly, every time you are in the Chair you achieve a better turnout than any of the Deputy Speakers.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East (Mr. Snape) for his kindness, and also for his friendship during the 21 years for which I have been a Member of Parliament. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen) for her kind words. When it became clear that a Speaker was required, she was a very staunch supporter.

I pay tribute to Speaker Betty Boothroyd. Betty's advice was, "Be firm, especially with the senior Members. Don't let them pressurise you and try to pull rank", but the thing that I remember her for is that, every day at conferences, her concern was always about the House. She always put the House of Commons first. I wish her every success.

As hon. Members know, the last election brought in many new Members on both sides of the House. I felt a deep obligation to give assistance and help to those new Members, regardless of the party that they came from. I feel that I carried out that duty to the full. I do not think that I could be criticised for denying anyone any help or assistance, either from the Chair or in the Tea Room. I would like to be remembered as a Deputy Speaker who was always fair and helpful.

My apprenticeship has been one of serving the House as a Chairman of Standing Committees, the Administration Committee and the Scottish Grand Committee. I have never sought to be a Whip, a Front-Bench spokesman or a Minister.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): Quite right.

Mr. Martin: Come to think of it, no one ever invited me to take those posts. I have enjoyed defending the rights of the House.

Modernisation has been talked about a lot in the current Parliament. I will match the hours that any hon. Member keeps in the House because, when hon. Members leave, the Deputy Speakers still have half an hour of Adjournment debate to go, but I am not proud of the fact that, when we go to New Palace yard, men and women who work for us in this building go to their homes and many of them as parents know that their sleep will be broken because they have to get their children out to school. Whenever we talk about hours, we must always consider the staff who work for us so well in the House.

There are new proposals from the Administration Committee to look at creche facilities. The Modernisation and Procedure Committees are looking at our voting system. Back Benchers should fight for these changes. I as Speaker will never interfere with those matters. I give the assurance that I will embrace the democratic decisions of the House. Change for the sake of change is no way in which to conduct our affairs, but, by the same token, to oppose change for the sake of tradition is equally wrong.

A Speaker has a clear duty to every section of the House, especially to Back Benchers, the minority parties and the Opposition parties. The House must hold the Executive to account. I am firmly of the view that the Speaker's duty is to serve the House, not the Executive power.

It says much for the House—and, indeed, for the political system to which we all belong—that someone from the poverty of Glasgow can stand before you seeking the great office of Speaker. My origins should be no reason for me being elected; nor should they be a reason to debar me. I submit myself to the House.

3.24 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Sir Alan Haselhurst".

Let me make it clear that I do not disagree with a single word that was said about my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin); moreover, I, like the rest of the House, listened with much interest to what he said. My hon. Friend and I have known each other for 21 years, and I hope that our friendship will not be broken by the fact that I am not supporting him today. There is only one vacancy: no one—not even my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn)—is suggesting that there should be a job share.

I do not wish to argue about whether we should continue the practice of the past 30 years of ensuring that the new Speaker is from a different party from that of the previous one. Although I realise that that practice dates back only 30 years and not to ancient times, I simply say to my right. hon. and hon. Friends that we should perhaps bear it in mind.

Why am I nominating the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir A. Haselhurst)? As hon. Members will know, he was first elected as an hon. Member in 1970. Although he lost his seat at the 1974 general election, he returned to the House faster than some of us retreads, being returned for Saffron Walden in 1977. I have seen in some press reports comments by one or two hon. Members suggesting that the right hon. Gentleman has been too strict an occupant of the Chair. Conversely, one leader—I think that it was in today's edition of *The Independent*—said that he had occasionally not shown sufficient force in that role. Although hon. Members can make their own judgment on the point, I believe that, occasionally, the occupant of the Chair has to show some strictness—and I say that as one who has occasionally been the subject of that strictness.

What basic qualities are required of a Speaker? I agree with the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) that decisions on the House and its future are not for the Speaker, but for hon. Members, and that it is for the House to decide our practices and policies. Therefore, we should not take the view that it is the occupant of the Chair who will decide how we conduct our business.

The first and foremost quality for a Speaker—hon. Members have said it before, but it should be said again—is absolute impartiality when occupying the Chair. At the same time, the Speaker must be in full control, even at times when the House is in a very bad mood, as sometimes happens. The Speaker must also be able to understand the changing mood of the House.

The Speaker must also defend the rights of Back Benchers. Although that point has been made many times before, I make it again because it is important. The Executive—whether this one or a previous one—are strong, and, as hon. Members know, the Executive can largely control the business of the House. Back Benchers need to be defended, and I hope that whoever occupies the Chair in this place will do just that.

Hon. Members can decide for themselves whether it is a virtue for a Speaker not to have held ministerial office. My hon. Friend the Member for Springburn said that he has not held such office. The right hon. Member for Saffron Walden, too, has not held such office. Hon. Members can decide for themselves whether such a person is better able to appreciate the difficulties and frustrations of Back Benchers than is someone who has held such office.

The Speaker is also our ambassador and representative at parliamentary gatherings overseas, and on other, similar occasions.

I believe that we need a Speaker who respects the history and traditions of this place. I am not one of those who believes that we can say that the House's traditions are not important and cast them aside. At the same time, however, we need a Speaker who appreciates the need for change. In the past few weeks, we have had many lectures from the media on that subject and on our business. Although the media never take the opportunity to lecture themselves, they have been lecturing us on all our weaknesses and blemishes. We should never forget, however, that the importance of this place cannot be underestimated, and that, if it did not exist, all our freedoms would not last for five minutes.

Finally, it has been suggested that the House of Commons requires a figure of glamour—someone with tremendous charisma. I have looked back at previous Speakers over the past 30 years. Betty Boothroyd is indeed a hard act to follow: she was an outstanding Speaker. However, if I were asked who were the other two best Speakers in the past 30 years—who best defended the right of Back Benchers and showed the greatest impartiality between Back Benchers and the Executive—my reply would be Selwyn Lloyd and Lord Weatherill. Before they were elected, would the press have said that Selwyn Lloyd and Lord Weatherill were glamorous figures of great charisma? Probably not. They would have been written off, like a number of today's nominees. Yet in the Chair, they demonstrated impartiality. Moreover, like Betty Boothroyd—and this is not to criticise any of the other Speakers of the past 30 years—Selwyn Lloyd and Lord Weatherill showed how to defend the House of Commons from the Speaker's Chair.

It is my view that the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden is in the same tradition. He has all the necessary qualities as Speaker, and I believe that he would serve the House without fear or favour. I therefore have much pleasure in putting his name before the House for consideration as Speaker.

Sir Edward Heath: Mr. Peter Brooke to second.

3.31 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): You, Sir Edward, will be pleased to hear that the last time I followed the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) in this Chamber, it was on Second Reading of an ageism Bill. It is an equal pleasure to follow the hon. Gentleman's eloquence today.

There is a sentence in "The Wrong Box" by Robert Louis Stevenson, to the effect that "it was a bottle of the worst whisky in Hampshire"—and only those familiar with that county could recognise the full force of that superlative. Whatever our opinions, this election is the greatest event to occur in this constituency today—and only those familiar with this constituency can recognise the full force of that superlative.

The speakership of this great House is the greatest gift this House can bestow on any Member. Many are called, yet few are chosen. Yet so great a gift is it that to be

runner-up in this contest is a greater privilege than to be the Speaker of 100 other legislatures. Because it is so great a gift, it is a serious business on which we are engaged.

I read in the public prints that the principle of the office passing evenly from party to party is now enshrined in our constitution. If it is, it clearly stands to the advantage of my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir A. Haselhurst). However, if the principle had been so enshrined eight years ago, I wonder why we held an election then. Surely no one would wish to sit as Speaker in this House unless they were the best man or woman to do so, which, over the past eight years, Speaker Boothroyd pre-eminently turned out to be.

So it is by the test of excellence and appositeness that our candidates must be measured, not by the more usual coinage of party label. By these nobler tests, my right hon. Friend starts with the considerable advantage of having been already long tested in the Chair. The opportunity afforded to us by Speaker Boothroyd of holding this election in this Parliament was specifically intended for an informed electorate to use its knowledge of already familiar candidates. Unlike that moment in 1972 when *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the recession was now so bad that the Mafia had had to lay off two judges in New Jersey, a deputy speakership of this House is no sinecure.

Because I have been taking a controversial private Bill through the House, I can testify that my right hon. Friend yields to no prior holder of his office in upholding by a robust and upstanding firmness the principle of the rules of order and the embargo on repetition. Yet I can also testify that he strains the cricketing principle of the benefit of the doubt to the extremities of scepticism before he intervenes on a fellow Back Bencher. He owes those qualities to his long Back-Bench experience and, appropriately, to his enjoyment of the confidence of colleagues who retained him as secretary of the all-party cricket group, even after his ascent to the Deputy Speaker's Chair.

My right hon. Friend and I share the coincidence of having been elected to the House in 1977 for our present seats, in seats in which there had also been by-elections in 1965, although my right hon. Friend had also served in the 1970 Parliament, when you, Sir Edward, were Prime Minister.

When we choose a Chairman of Ways and Means, beyond the acceptability of the candidate must lie the desirability of that candidate's being a foil to the Speaker. Not for nothing did our last two Speakers proceed to the Chair from a deputy's role. In all human affairs, there is virtue in a successor's not being a precise simulacrum of the predecessor whom he or she follows. In such variety do institutions breathe, live and grow. To borrow an analogy from cricket, our most recent Speaker was, mutatis mutandis, an Ian Botham—colourful, and an all-rounder with a perpetual capacity to surprise. My right hon. Friend, however, is a Leonard Hutton—neat, tidy, solid, classical and a central figure of immense reliability.

We must come to the point of making up our own minds. When Professor Joad—as he then was not—sat his scholarship exam at Oxford, he was asked to write for three hours on the question, "Can a good man be happy on the rack?". He wrote a single sentence in a minute and a half: "If he were a very good man and it were a very bad rack, yes; if not, no." The rack, which, like the inventions of the White Knight in Alice, is of our own devising, is, for that reason, a very good rack, to which my right hon. Friend has volunteered to subject himself. Like Joad's character, he is a very good man indeed. Most important of all, he is his own man, and I am delighted to second his nomination.

Sir Edward Heath: Sir Alan Haselhurst has been proposed and seconded, so I give him the opportunity to submit himself to the House.

3.37 pm

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden): I last spoke in the House on 29 October 1996, so I hope that hon. Members will recognise that I may be a little rusty. I could not then have imagined that my next speech would be made in these circumstances. I feel obliged to acknowledge the endless uncertainties of political life, which conspired to make me the 63rd Chairman of Ways and Means. That wholly unexpected elevation brought me for the first time into regular contact with Speaker Boothroyd. In the previous Parliament, judging from afar, I had never had cause to doubt her qualities in the Chair, but having gained the privilege of seeing her conduct of the office of Speaker close at hand, I soon became aware of the diligent and conscientious way in which she approached her many duties. The love that Speaker Boothroyd expressed for the House when she accepted nomination eight years ago was always evident in our working meetings. She coupled it with intuitive human insight and lashings of good sense. Betty Boothroyd was a huge personality, and a great Speaker.

Hon. Members often come to the Chamber with speeches in our hands that we may never have the chance to deliver. That feeling has been hovering around me—and, I suspect, others—today. I have always found speaking in the House an extremely daunting experience, because I respect this place above all as the most formidable of democratic debating chambers. I bow to the experience and knowledge that the hon. Members around me collectively represent.

I have, however, never had any doubt about wanting to be part of this place. It was a tremendous moment for me when, in the early hours of June 1970, with my parents present, I was declared to be the Member for Middleton and Prestwich—towns now represented respectively by the hon. Members for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) and for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis). I have to say, however—with no disrespect to the people who gave me my first chance in public life, and for whom I have the greatest affection—that what I felt then could not match the emotion and thrill I felt on being returned for Saffron Walden, because by then I had knowledge of what this House was all about, what it meant to me and how important a place I believed it to be.

Thus, Sir Edward, in 1977 I was able to resume my meteoric career on the Back Benches. Never privileged with nor burdened by office, I have had plenty of opportunity to observe and understand the frustrations and constraints of Back-Bench life. I have always been restless to see improvements in the support given to Back Benchers. The power of the Executive has grown and grown, while the capacity of the legislature to check it has not increased commensurately. Arguably, it

[Sir Alan Haselhurst]

has diminished. The constituency work load has become steadily more demanding. More and more Members have found it difficult to cope while spending a proper amount of their time undertaking the scrutiny process.

There is another factor: that is family life. When I was originally elected, I was a bachelor. In my first Parliament, I revelled in being here all hours. By 1982, when I had three small children, I took rather a different view and was not always the first to be looking for overtime. I firmly believe that those are issues that the House must address, if only to demonstrate to the public that we are doing an effective job on their behalf and that this is the place—above all others—where their interests will be served.

However, it is for the House as a whole to determine the way in which it wishes to go forward. It is not easy to find a prescription that unites us all—and certainly not one that an individual Speaker can impose. The Speaker should seek only to be a guide—perhaps a catalyst. The Speaker can, however, be a conductor and try to ensure that the pace of our proceedings is more lively, to maximise opportunities for Back Benchers.

So I present myself to the House, Sir Edward, as a moderate moderniser, hopefully gauging the mood of the House and anxious to work with the grain of reform and renewal; as someone who passionately believes that debate and argument over the affairs of this nation must be joined pre-eminently here and not elsewhere; and, I hope, as a convinced champion of individual and minority interests in this House.

I am most grateful to the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) for their willingness to put forward my name and for their generous remarks.

In the 1970 Parliament, I shared with Harold Wilson the distinction that we were the only two Yorkshiremen to represent Lancashire seats. It is asking much, I know, for the House to contemplate two Yorkshire-born Speakers in a row, so it is perhaps in the guise of Essex man that I should, in accordance with ancient custom, submit myself to the will of the House. If chosen, I will serve it faithfully and with resolution.

Sir Edward Heath: The original Question was, "That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker", since when an amendment has been proposed to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert "Sir Alan Haselhurst".

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 140, Noes 345.

Division No. 299] **[3.44 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allen, Graham
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Betts, Clive
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burstow, Paul
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Cohen, Harry
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Grogan, John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Haselhurst, Rt Hon Sir Alan
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hoey, Kate
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hurst, Alan
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Miller, Andrew
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morley, Elliot
Moss, Malcolm
O'Hara, Eddie
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pearson, Ian
Pickles, Eric
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Stinchcombe, Paul
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Tipping, Paddy
Trend, Michael
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Viggers, Peter
Walker, Cecil
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Winnick, David

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Snape and Ann Keen.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*

Benton, Joe
Bercow, John
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hume, John
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leigh, Edward
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malliaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Martlew, Eric
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*

Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir David Madel and
Mr. Bill Rammell.

Question accordingly negatived.

3.56 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. Alan Beith".

I crave the House's indulgence in allowing someone who once broke the Speaker's Chair to nominate someone to occupy it. It is a reflection on the House that those of us who entered as revolutionaries are in danger of departing as mere reformers. I also hope that the House will see that the fact that I shall stand down at the coming election does not detract at all from the idea that I should propose a Speaker, but adds weight to the nomination, because I cannot be said to stand to gain in any shape or form if the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) is successful.

I have an excellent perspective from which to commend the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed. I have sat behind him on this Bench—as he has sat in front of me—for the last 26 years. In that length of time, one overhears quite a few conversations, and I can say quite honestly that I have never heard the right hon. Gentleman say anything malicious about any Member in any part of the House.

Equally, I have a certain insight. Mind you, Sir Edward, the process of overhearing works in two ways. When I was a young Member and new in the House, I said to my colleague Dafydd Elis-Thomas—now a Member of the other House—something less than complimentary about the then leader of the Liberal party, Jeremy Thorpe. It was quite a shock for me when the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed very gently chided me—in perfect Welsh.

In fact, I have a choice today between supporting a Welsh-speaking non-Welsh Speaker, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, and a non-Welsh speaking Welsh Speaker, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody)—among many other non-Welsh possibilities.

I advocate the election of the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed for three reasons, which I am sure that he, as a lay preacher, will appreciate—and none of them is to do with the Welsh language. First, I believe that, as part of the checks and balances in this House, the speakership should move around the House and not just be shared between the two largest parties.

It was my belief in such checks and balances that led me last week to support as Deputy Presiding Officer in the National Assembly for Wales our Labour colleague, the hon. Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek). I have no doubt that Labour Members in this Chamber will recognise the merit of having a Speaker from the other side of the Chamber, and if they do not do so now, they may see the benefit in future. It is certainly valuable to have such checks and balances, so that not everything goes in one political direction.

I further believe that Members from the smaller parties should not automatically be ruled out for our most senior appointment if they are worthy candidates. In the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed we have such a candidate.

My second reason for proposing the right hon. Gentleman is his experience, which equips him to do the job. He has been a Member of the House since 1973, and represents a constituency in north-east England, so he is aware of the challenges that face so many Members whose constituencies are well away from the home counties. He has 20 years' experience on the House of Commons Commission, and as a reformer, he has successfully fought for the principle that the House, not the Government of the day, should run the buildings in which we work.

In that capacity, the right hon. Gentleman helped, in the face of Treasury opposition, to secure the allowance that provides pensions for Members' secretaries and researchers. We need a Speaker who takes the side of the House against the Executive, whichever party is in power. The right hon. Gentleman has fought to make this a more family friendly House, supporting the provision of a creche and a child care allowance, and advocating sensible working hours. In that capacity, he has developed good working relations with Members from all parties, which is a prerequisite for being Speaker.

The right hon. Gentleman was, of course, a candidate for his party's leadership, and the very characteristics that may have detracted from that candidature may equip him to be an effective Speaker. He is a patient person, he has a balanced view, he can see both sides of an argument, and he can dispassionately form a considered judgment. Those are not necessarily the main attributes necessary for a party leader, but they are essential qualities for the Speaker of the House.

Thirdly, I propose the right hon. Gentleman on account of his strength of character and personality, which equip him to do an outstanding job. He is transparently fair, and that is essential for any Speaker. His strength of character grows out of his deeply held personal convictions, and that is a strength that any Speaker needs to withstand the pressures of the Executive, of vested interest, and, indeed, of political colleagues. The right hon. Gentleman has the deep, quiet strength to do the job.

May I also refer to the strength and dignity that the right hon. Gentleman showed when he suffered two tragic bereavements, in which he had the sympathy of the whole House. He ably demonstrated at that time that he could ride the storms of life and still carry the responsibilities of office. He also has respect for this institution, while not being blind to its shortcomings. He is a reformer at a time when reform must surely be high on our agenda.

Finally, as I am the retiring Member for Caernarfon, a seat held by David Lloyd George for 53 years, it gives me great pleasure to propose that we elect a Liberal—

well, at least, a Liberal Democrat—as Speaker. My grandmother, who was for 13 years president of Pwllheli Liberal association, would be smiling from her grave. I have not had a political change of heart, but I hope that we all recognise a good person when we see one, and I urge fellow Members to elect the right hon. Gentleman as a worthy Speaker of the House.

4.4 pm

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): It is my privilege and pleasure to second the nomination of my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). As Members have heard, he has been a Member of this place since 1973, which is long enough to know the institution. He is a natural parliamentarian and has become part of the institution, but he has not become institutionalised, and as someone who still thinks of herself as something of a revolutionary, I think that that is particularly important.

In this media and image-conscious age, sometimes the image and the person do not match, but my right hon. Friend's image is one of reliability, of being a safe pair of hands, of loyalty and of competence. In this case, the man matches the image, but two more qualities should be added to that list: he has a keen sense of humour and a passion for democracy. Both are much needed in the Speaker of this place.

As a Member from the 1997 intake and a Back Bencher, what I hope for most in the Speaker is someone who will defend the rights of Back Benchers and of the House against any overbearing Executive. When I was elected, I appreciated the encouragement and advice of Speaker Boothroyd and I know that my right hon. Friend has the ability and the commitment to give such encouragement and advice to all Back Benchers. As a Liberal, he is used to being independent of mind and of action. That is also essential in a Speaker.

In my view, the House needs not modernisation but something much more radical. The House needs to reform itself, and we can do that with the help of a reforming Speaker. However, we must judge the candidates today not on their verbal commitments to reform, but on their past practical commitment and examples. My right hon. Friend has a track record that will withstand any scrutiny. He was a distinguished member of the House of Commons Commission for many years, but even before that he showed a commitment to the welfare of the staff of this place when he successfully moved an amendment to a Government motion on Members' allowances to create a ring-fenced allowance for pensions for Members' staff.

My right hon. Friend is a fair-minded man, as the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) has said. He is an open-minded man and, in my view, admirably suited to the Speaker's Chair. I am proud to support his nomination and hope that he will have the support of all Members of the House.

Sir Edward Heath: Mr. Alan Beith has been proposed and seconded, so I give him the opportunity to submit himself to the House.

4.7 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I begin by warmly thanking my kind proposer and seconder and by echoing the tributes to Betty Boothroyd and her speakership. I had the privilege of working with her for about 20 years in various capacities, but particularly in the House of Commons Commission. It is sometimes not recognised what a large, submerged portion of work the Speaker engages in—work that is not apparent when the Speaker takes the Chair. I saw a newspaper report that there was a cushy job going in the House of Commons involving three hours work a day. Well, I can testify from Speaker Boothroyd's hard work—day and evening long—that there is a lot more to it than that, and that much work goes on behind the scenes.

Indeed, in those capacities it was my pleasure often to meet and work with the hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin), whom I count as a friend. I have worked with him for many years, especially when he was Chairman of the Administration Committee and I served on the Commission. We did not always agree, but I have to say that in those days, the Administration and Accommodation and Works Committees were not hotbeds of reform or modernisation. I have a great and warm respect for his personal qualities, so it is rather strange to have entered what seems a little like a fairground boxing ring to contend with him. That is the nature of the procedure: we are proposed in turn, one by one—although I advise Members who want an early tea that the proceedings can be brought to a close quite quickly by electing me. By doing so, they would elect the first Speaker from the Berwick-upon-Tweed constituency since 1656—and he had the benefit of a bit of help from Oliver Cromwell, which is not available today. Indeed, we had our last Liberal Speaker in the 1920s, and he probably had a bit of help from Lloyd George. That is not available, either.

The Speaker is the servant of the House, so all the commitments that we make at hustings, meetings and in the Chamber about reforms that we should like to achieve are subject to a proviso: it is the House that decides. In my experience, there are many roadblocks on the way to reform in the House. It is my hope that the Speaker will not be one of them. The Speaker should enable the House to release its potential to be more effective in the service of our constituents, in the scrutiny of legislation and in holding the Executive to account. Frankly, some of our ways do not assist that. The Speaker who is ready to support the House in seeking to make the procedures more effective would do the nation a service.

We should use time productively and effectively. I express personal views, which any Speaker would have to submit to the House, as the House makes the decisions, but I do not find the notion of very long debates attended by very few Members, which are little regarded outside the House, particularly contributive to effective scrutiny. Such debates are one of the factors that discourage some people from serving in the House, and make it difficult for some to continue to do so. We must not be an exclusive institution.

Although the Speaker is dependent on the will of the House concerning some changes that can be made, Speakers can do other things. There are private notice questions, emergency debates and procedures to stand over debates when the range of opinion has not been properly represented. Some of those have not been used all that often in recent times. There are opportunities for

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

the occupant of the Chair to make use of those procedures to help Back Benchers and to give them the chance to express their concerns. A reforming spirit behind the way in which we use our Standing Orders can do some good.

Whoever wins this election will as their first duty lay public claim to the liberties and freedoms of the House of Commons. There must be some substance to that claim. We are not simply reclaiming the 16th and 17th-century freedoms of the House. We must lay claim to freedoms that make the House effective and enable it to challenge the Executive and legislate well. Some reforms are necessary to that task.

I have been honoured to serve in this House and look forward to continuing to do so. It is an honour and a privilege. I am proud to be a Member—but one can be proud of an institution and still recognise that it needs to change, to make itself more effective and to renew itself. The House is not our property; it is the legislature of the people of the United Kingdom. It is not run for our benefit as Members; it is their institution, in which we should stop regarding them as strangers and recognise them as the people who elect us and whom we are here to serve. I have sought in 27 years to work for parliamentary democracy in this place, and I pledge myself to continue to do so.

Question put, That the amendment be made:

The House divided: Ayes 83, Noes 409.

Division No. 300] **[4.13 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Colman, Tony
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Denham, John
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Drown, Ms Julia
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Mullin, Chris
Oaten, Mark
Pearson, Ian
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rendel, David
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Walker, Cecil
Wallace, James
Webb, Steve
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Lembit Öpik and
Mr. Elfyn Llwyd.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cran, James
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Duncan Smith, Iain
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike

Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Graham, Thomas
Greenway, John
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Hayes, John
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hume, John
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Key, Robert
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lammy, David
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leigh, Edward
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, Oliver
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLeish, Henry
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Maples, John
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Ottaway, Richard
Palmer, Dr Nick
Paterson, Owen
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prior, David
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
St Aubyn, Nick
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soames, Nicholas
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Spicer, Sir Michael
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Streeter, Gary
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Townend, John
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walter, Robert
Ward, Ms Claire
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, David
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilshire, David
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

Sir Edward Heath: I call Mr. David Davis to move the amendment in favour of Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody.

4.26 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody".

Before I start the substantive part of my speech, may I add my tribute to Speaker Boothroyd's term of office? She took charge of the House at a most difficult time for a Speaker, when televising of proceedings had recently started and there were difficult Parliaments. She carried out that duty with enormous skill and capacity.

Notwithstanding what I shall say now, I was impressed by the performance of all the candidates at the hustings this morning. Candidates took seriously the arguments in favour of the reform and progress of the House of Commons.

I laid out earlier my ideal template for the speakership, but that is not the only template. In the 19th century, Delane, the great editor of *The Times*, called for a Speaker who was of

imperturbable good temper, tact, patience and urbanity.

Everybody will recognise the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) in that description.

Nevertheless, I return to my own template, which was that of a Speaker of strength, independence, integrity, passionate commitment to the Commons in its role of scrutinising Government and holding them to account and, within that, a relentless commitment to the rights of Back Benchers. In the House of Commons, it has often been the Back Bencher who has stood up for the liberties of the individual. I look back to the predecessor of the Deputy Prime Minister and myself, William Wilberforce, onwards through Rathbone and a number of others of whom we should be proud. They could have done their task only with the assistance of the Speaker of the House at the time.

The Speaker must be not just independent of the Government of any persuasion, but determined that that Government will subject themselves to the democratic will of the House of Commons. It has already been said by a number of hon. Members that that is not just the function of the Speaker. It also falls to the Members of the House, but it falls to them under the leadership of the Speaker and subject to the powers that he or she exercises. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), the previous candidate, spoke eloquently of some of those.

The position of Speaker requires a passionately committed House of Commons man or woman. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich meets that template perfectly. I believe that she will deploy her formidable personality in defending the rights of the House. She has shown great independence in her role as Chairman of the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. Again, the Deputy Prime Minister will have particular interest in that.

We will need the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich to do that in the future. We will need a reforming Speaker, and she will be that. She has made a major contribution to the Liaison Committee's report proposing reforms to enhance the powers and effectiveness of the Select Committees and to make them more independent of the Whips—a point that has come up several times today.

In addition, when the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich spoke this morning, she proposed a Speaker's Conference to reform radically and update the House of Commons. If she is chosen today, she would oversee such a Conference, which would have to balance the need to make the House more family friendly—no one disputes that need—with that of making it do its job more effectively. Achieving that golden mean will require imagination and experience. The hon. Lady has the experience: she has served the House for a total of 30 years; 26 of them continuously. She has served in government; she therefore understands only too well the pressures and imperatives of office. However, it was long enough ago for her not to be biased by it today.

The hon. Lady understands the Select Committee system and the Chamber. She has played an active part in both. She has eminently chaired the Transport Sub-Committee and been a Deputy Speaker in Westminster Hall. She brings a keen intellect and imagination to those tasks. The hon. Lady has served the House diligently for many years.

The House needs a reforming Speaker; circumstances demand a reforming Speaker. I commend the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich to the House for the post.

4.31 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): Self-evidently, this is an important day for the House of Commons. As other speakers have said, Parliament is central to the democracy of this land; it is the last port of call for the voice of citizens to be heard. Over several Parliaments, we have been accused of not performing a vital task. Today, we have the chance to begin the process of restoring power to elected Members speaking for their constituents, improving legislation and holding the Executive to account.

I have the honour of seconding the motion that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) become Speaker. With a strong Executive, it is crucial to have an independent, gutsy, hard-hitting Speaker to stand up for the House, its Members and the people whom it represents. Those qualities are matched by my hon. Friend's experience in the House. As Deputy Speaker in Westminster Hall, Chairman of the Transport Sub-Committee and member of the Chairman's Panel, my hon. Friend's knowledge of the House's rituals and procedures is second to none.

My hon. Friend has always been a formidable campaigner and advocate in a range of Front-Bench positions, beginning as Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade in 1967 and ranging across foreign affairs, health, media and, of course, transport. I know from civil servants to whom I have spoken how much they look forward to appearing before the Transport Sub-Committee when my hon. Friend chairs it, and how much they enjoy being faced by her indirect, faltering, diffident and benign questioning!

Surely we want a Speaker who is like my hon. Friend: who is clear, decisive, speaks her mind and is able to speak for the House. Anyone who knows her realises that she is passionate, forthright and independent. As others have said, she respects the House and the values that it represents.

Flicking through *Hansard*, as one does, I came across a memorable passage, which is taken from my hon. Friend's last foray into elections for Speaker, in

April 1992. She was not standing on that occasion, but she nominated my right hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, West (Miss Boothroyd), whom she praised for her witty, hard-hitting public persona and for being very much in charge and keeping us all in place. That was true of my right hon. Friend Member for West Bromwich, West, who will be greatly missed. In turning those words back on my hon. Friend, I can only say, "It takes one to know one."

Hon. Members should be in no doubt about how hard my hon. Friend will work on their behalf, irrespective of their attitudes, beliefs or individuality. In the 13 years that I have spent in the House, I have come to respect her many qualities and singular character. She has been thoughtful and attentive to me and other hon. Members across the political spectrum and to the many staff who work here. She does not do that in public. When the going got tough in Northern Ireland, she would call, not necessarily to agree with what I was doing, but always to offer solidarity and support from one Member to another. I also like her direct, honest and straightforward approach to life in the House. She is a hard-working Member who does the business. She stays late for Division after Division. She is never seen slipping out; she is always seen standing in the taxi queue after voting and doing her duty to the House.

My hon. Friend values the House and the work that it does, but that does not mean that she is against change. She and I agree on the need to reform the workings of the House for all of us—women and men—and especially on the need for more women to be elected. I believe that a woman Speaker constitutes a good mentor and encourages other women into the House.

I support my hon. Friend, but that does not mean that I agree with all that she supports—far from it. We have differences of opinion on many issues, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, but we discuss and argue the points. That shows that it is perfectly possible to hold different views, but to remain friends, as many hon. Members know. She does that all the time.

At a time when we need to increase public confidence and respect in our political system, we must make up our minds: do we want someone who will put the House in order and put its independence first? My hon. Friend will certainly do that.

Sir Edward Heath: Mrs. Dunwoody has been proposed and seconded. I give her the opportunity to submit herself to the House.

4.36 pm

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): The House of Commons is periodically faced with a decision that can help to shape its future, its commitment to democracy and the way in which it protects the interests of those who send us here. Impossible though it may seem, legislation does not spring ready polished and perfected from the loins of any Government of whatever colour. It needs to be carefully scrutinised; it needs to be carefully evaluated and, above all, it needs to be improved. That is the reason why the House of Commons has, over the years, taken to itself the power not only to examine the legislation that is presented to it, but to think deeply about its effects because what we do here affects the lives of all our constituents at every level. We produce legislation that carries sanction, that affects not only the way in which children are educated and people are cared for, but the future of the country and its role in the world.

I have deep faith in the ability of the House of Commons to keep those powers inviolate because we know that that is our role. We are very disparate; we come in all sizes and shapes. Some of us are perhaps not as thin as others, but we have the experience and variety, and the faith of those who put us here, to be capable of carefully considering what is presented to us and improving it on every level. I have seen many Parliaments, and each is different from its predecessor, but I have also seen something that has disturbed me: the gradual erosion, under many names, of the rights of Back-Bench Members. Sometimes that is called a procedural change; sometimes an alteration of view, but Back-Benchers have certainly seen a gradual slipping away of that power.

What I want, and what I believe the House of Commons and, indeed, the United Kingdom want, is a Parliament that not only knows its worth, but can hold up its collective head and say, "We have done the very best that we can do for you who elected us. We have exercised our power of judgment. We have concerned ourselves with what is good, what is bad and what is unacceptable and we have taken a view. We give an undertaking that we will never fail as a collective body to continue to exercise that individual judgment."

This is a great honour for me. I would not like hon. Members to be misled by the high quality and status of those who have proposed and seconded me. I do not come garlanded, with powerful groups behind me. Impossible though it may seem, I may not be everyone's automatic choice, but in my time in this place I have learned to appreciate that people on both sides of the House have something to contribute. They are sent here because of their ability, and because they represent a cross-section of the United Kingdom, are responsible and are capable of exercising judgment.

Any Speaker who comes to office now will face great challenges, because there are those who prefer the smooth passage, the uninterrupted arrangement, the careful management of our time and, ultimately, of our programme. We must always remember that, inadequate though we are, we are still individuals with families and homes and, indeed, constituencies to look after. We have that power. We in the House of Commons have the right to change our parliamentary year—we can vote that through when we want. We have the right to change our working day. We have the right to call a Speaker's Conference to consider carefully the constitutional changes that we demand, and to put those changes to the House and ask for its support. We have all those rights, which have been hard fought for over a long period, and we must never easily let go of them.

I do not come to hon. Members as a perfect parliamentarian. I do not come as the choice of those who know how I will react. I come as someone who, from the bottom of my heart, will serve the House in every way that I am able. I will serve the House, because to me Parliament is one of the most important things in our democratic country. We must protect it; we must improve it. We must take back the power that others seek to take away from us. Above all, we must never forget that we

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

are here to do a job for those who have elected us. I pledge that hon. Members will always have my support in performing that task in the best way possible.

Sir Edward Heath: The original Question was, "That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker", since when an amendment has been proposed to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody".

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 170, Noes 341.

Division No. 301] **[4.43 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bercow, John
Best, Harold
Blunt, Crispin
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cash, William
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Dalyell, Tam
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Galbraith, Sam
Gale, Roger
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Godman, Dr Norman A
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Graham, Thomas
Gray, James
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hain, Peter
Hammond, Philip
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hoey, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kidney, David
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
McDonnell, John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
McWalter, Tony
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Pike, Peter L
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stevenson, George
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Viggers, Peter
Walker, Cecil
Walley, Ms Joan
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wareing, Robert N
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilshire, David
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Maclean and Helen Jones.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berrningham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Crausby, David
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*

Curry, Rt Hon David
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Gorrie, Donald
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hume, John
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Khabra, Piara S
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Maples, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Ottaway, Richard
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prior, David
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Streeter, Gary
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

Sir Edward Heath: I call the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) to move the amendment in favour of the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young).

4.55 pm

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert thereof "Sir George Young".

[Mr. John MacGregor]

One of the difficulties in a contested election such as this one, when there are so many candidates, is that all hon. Members have many friends among the candidates, the proposers and the seconders on both sides of the House. We also recognise that all the candidates have particular claims and merits. However, although many of us are torn one way or the other by that, we have finally and invidiously to name one choice as our preferred candidate.

I am proposing my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) simply because I believe that he has the widest experience for the job. At the start of this Parliament, I had the great privilege of seconding Speaker Boothroyd, and she has indeed proved to be an outstanding Speaker. I am now proposing my right hon. Friend because the qualities that he has demonstrated in plenty over the years in the House would, I am sure, make him an equally outstanding, although different candidate.

I should like very briefly to make four points, the first of which is on my right hon. Friend's personal qualities. Anyone who has had any dealings with him, in public or in private, will testify to his approachability, his fairness, his ability to get on with everyone and his delightful sense of humour, which would stand him in good stead when, in difficult moments, the temperature and the temper of the House require it. However, he has also frequently demonstrated his firmness in seeing issues through. That quality will ensure his authority and his ability, when necessary, to command the House.

Throughout all the party battles in which my right hon. Friend has been engaged in the House, he has fought his case not only vigorously, but always courteously and in a manner that has won him respect and friends across party boundaries. He has also shown his independence of mind and his willingness to detach himself from the party line, as in his opposition as a Back Bencher to—dare I say it—the community charge. It is those qualities that have brought my right hon. Friend support from both sides of the House in this election.

Secondly, my right hon. Friend has wide experience of all the various roles in the House. I heard what the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) said on that matter—that hon. Members can have differing views on it. I believe that it is very valuable to have a Speaker who has wide experience of all the various roles.

My right hon. Friend has shown his independence of the Executive. However, among the candidates, because of his ministerial jobs, he has unrivalled knowledge of how the Executive work. I think that that matters, because knowledge of how the Executive work enables someone who is championing the House to deal with them better. Indeed, all four Speakers in my time in the House, since 1974, have had Front-Bench experience. My right hon. Friend knows the ropes and will not let the Executive get away with anything. I am certain that he will always put the House first.

My right hon. Friend's experience in the Whips Office is equally relevant.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): It disqualifies him.

Mr. MacGregor: Then it also disqualified Speaker Boothroyd, who occasionally was heard to observe to Whips, "I know what you're up to, because I was in the Whips Office once."

My right hon. Friend also knows the frustrations of opposition, on both the Front and the Back Benches. He has considerable experience of being a Back Bencher. Indeed, hon. Members who have recently been elected to the House may not know that, in 1989, he was *The Spectator*'s Back Bencher of the year. It could be said of him, therefore, that he has made a successful transition from Government to Opposition, and from Government to Back Bencher.

Thirdly, and crucially, I share the concerns about the perceived decline in the standing and importance of this House, particularly the democratic dangers of being sidelined by the Executive, and hence the need to strengthen the House's control over the Executive. This has been commented on so widely that I do not think that I need to elaborate further, except to say that my right hon. Friend's credentials in this respect are clear from the contributions that he has made in various ways as shadow Leader of the House, and in his lectures outside the House, such as that given to the Hansard Society earlier this year. He will give high priority to strengthening the powers of Parliament and, within that, the role and career of the Back Bencher.

Finally, it was a 16th-century Speaker, Speaker Yelverton, who said that one of the qualities required of the Speaker was "a carriage majestical". I do not know whether a bicycle qualifies, but in every other way my right hon. Friend has a carriage majestical. The role of the Speaker as ambassador for the House, here and abroad, and increasingly in the media, at conferences and in meeting delegations has greatly increased, and my right hon. Friend has the stature to be a worthy successor to Speaker Boothroyd in that respect.

My right hon. Friend is not one to blow his own trumpet. Indeed, his modesty is such that he has probably been listening rather blushingly to what I have been saying about him. However, these are the qualities and qualifications that have led me to believe that he is the right choice for Speaker. Above all, he is a House of Commons person through and through.

We are engaged in a byzantine process this afternoon. I fully recognise the difficulties that you face, Sir Edward, but I have much sympathy with the proposal of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). In this process, we face complex decisions. I am simply voting for the person whom I think will make the best Speaker, and that is why I am delighted to propose my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire.

Sir Edward Heath: I call on Mrs. Helen Jackson to second.

5.1 pm

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I did not really ever expect to be in this position, and I am vaguely looking for Betty to give me some moral support. However, she is not here, but you are instead, Sir Edward.

I was going to start by suggesting that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) stands head and shoulders above any other candidate, but then thought that that would be a bit corny. That is something that he cannot help, any more than he can help which school his parents sent him to which was, I understand, quite expensive, so we have to consider his other attributes.

To Labour Members, the right hon. Gentleman is, first and foremost, a Tory. I have heard many people over the past few days say that to all intents and purposes, that disqualifies him from even putting his name forward for Speaker of this House. I think that that is wrong. Labour Members are dead proud of our thumping majority, and we can do whatever we like if it comes to a vote. We will do so tomorrow, and I hope that we will continue to do so for many years. However, I believe that this is not the day to thump our thumping majority, but to think about who we want sitting in the Speaker's Chair for the foreseeable future.

Betty was an Opposition Member when she was elected on my first day in Parliament. Whoever is elected today—and there have been some powerful speeches—should have clear support across the Chamber. It relieves us all a little from the dominance of the party machine. Each one of us comes here as a representative of all our constituents, however they vote. Although we get tied down in the party machine, as Members of this Parliament we represent everyone.

Apart from that, the right hon. Gentleman has some endearing parliamentary experiences. It must have been interesting to have been sacked by Margaret Thatcher because of his views on the poll tax. It was a great shame that he could not take the rest of his party with him, but we are living to pick up the pieces.

The right hon. Gentleman believes in winning arguments through debate, not shenanigans or silly behaviour. He has even been known to hold up the progress of a debate until someone appropriate could appear on our side of the Dispatch Box to let it continue. He does what he believes in, and he acts on what he says. That is partly why he founded the bicycle club, and we should have to be careful to watch the bicycling mileage allowance if he became Speaker. The right hon. Gentleman also has a sense of humour.

My support for the right hon. Gentleman arises mainly as a result of my work with him on the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons. I would describe him as a rebel—a skilful, Front-Bench rebel. He has not had the majority support of his own side for his role on the Committee, but, partly because of his work, that Committee has ensured that the House has made some progress on Westminster Hall and Thursday evening sittings—both of which he supports—and on our appalling and unsocial hours.

It has been fascinating and good to hear supporting statements by the other candidates today in favour of modernising the House. I feel like suggesting to some Members on my own side of the House that we little babes have clearly had some impact. The time for words or for good intentions has passed. I do not want to spend any more time in Parliament asking futile questions every month of the Chairman of the House of Commons Commission, which, because of its archaic and inane Committees, has to run this place as if it were a sort of ex-military machine.

Only one candidate knows not what he will say about modernising the House and bringing it into the 21st century but what he will do, and that candidate is the right hon. Gentleman. On that basis, I second his nomination.

Sir Edward Heath: Sir George Young has been proposed and seconded, and I give him the opportunity to submit himself to the House.

5.7 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) and to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) for their kind words. I have never claimed a penny in bicycle mileage allowance, and I do not propose to do so. Whoever takes the Chair has a hard act to follow in Betty Boothroyd.

My constituents are used to having their Member of Parliament contest the election for Speaker. The Member for Andover in 1705, one John Smith, threw his hat into the ring. The court declared for Mr. Smith, but others declared for a Mr. Bromley, described as

> a man of grave deportment, and good morals but looked upon as a violent Tory.

A week before the vote, a contemporary noted:

> The Election of the Speaker is still very uncertain, for at least twenty of Mr. Smith's friends are absent.

In the vote, 81 placemen voted for Smith, including his fellow Member for Andover, whom Queen Anne presented with

> a purse of 1000 guineas as a token of her satisfaction of his choice.

However, 17 placemen voted against Smith, including the secretary to Prince George, who received the news of his dismissal as he voted in the Lobby. John Smith became the first Speaker of Great Britain and one of the first to sign the treaty of Union with Scotland. His successor as Member for Andover won with a majority of 10, having received 24 votes to his opponent's 14.

Three hundred years later, the core responsibilities of the Speaker remain the same: to protect the rights of Members of this House and to enable them to hold the Executive to account. However, although those responsibilities remain unchanged, the environment in which they need to be exercised has changed dramatically. More recently, the terms of trade have shifted away from the House towards the Executive; they need to be shifted back. Other institutions now rival Parliament with claims to power and influence. We have 24-hour media, demanding instant news; pressure on Members' time has grown tenfold; and our constituents are more numerous and, rightly, more demanding. I ask myself whether the House has fully adjusted to those changed circumstances.

I believe that a strong Parliament is good for the country and good for government. If the House loses influence, the Government can drop their guard and are no longer properly held to account. If the institution of which we are collective members loses influence, it affects our ability individually to represent our constituents.

The heart of Parliament is this Chamber. I believe it needs to beat more strongly—sending oxygen around the rest of the body politic. It needs to be more relevant to the lives of our constituents and more challenging to the Executive. Parliament is the buckle between the people and their Government; it has become loose.

Some say that Parliament should be modernised; I prefer the word "strengthened". Do we need a career structure outside Government for independent-minded Back Benchers, so that the Government do not hoover up most of the talent? Should we hold the Government more effectively to account on their expenditure? Could Opposition time be put to better effect than taking it in Opposition days and half-days, rather than by the right to

[Sir George Young]

demand statements when the Government are reluctant to volunteer them? If we have shorter hours—I have been kept out of my bed later and more often than most people—how do we do that without prejudicing the quality of our work? Those are two sides of the same coin.

The answers to these and other questions are for the House, and the Speaker is the servant of the House; but the Speaker has influence and can act as a catalyst in this process of strengthening Parliament. I would like to play a part in that. I have been both Whip and rebel. I have been an inner-city Member and, now, a rural Member. I have had a three-figure majority and a five-figure majority. My four children have grown up while I have been a Member.

For my 26 years in this place, I have been in the Conservative party, but—to repeat a familiar phrase—not run by the Conservative party. *[Laughter.]* I have sat, with others, on the House of Commons Commission, with its budget of £150 million and responsibility for thousands who work here. I think that we could have more cohesive management of the separate Departments and indeed of the building, for the benefit of Members and of those people who work and visit here.

For a post that no one wants, the speakership is doing rather well. For those of us who are unsuccessful, there is another high-profile job currently available, which, by tradition, no one wants—full-time manager of the English football team.

Sir Edward, I regard all the candidates as my friends. We all have different interests and qualities. I, along with them, am happy to submit to the judgment of the House.

Sir Edward Heath: The original Question was, "That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker", since when an amendment has been proposed to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Sir George Young".

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 241, Noes 317.

Division No. 302] **[5.13 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allen, Graham
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Denham, John
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Grogan, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Horam, John
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Maples, John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Pickles, Eric
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Raynsford, Nick
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*

Soames, Nicholas
Soley, Clive
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Streeter, Gary
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaz, Keith
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Richard Ottaway and
Mr. Martin Salter.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hume, John
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Martin, Michael J
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*

Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

5.26 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. Menzies Campbell".

In proposing the name of Ming Campbell, I realise that I am breaking the tradition by nominating a member of a minority party. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) pointed out in his letter to *The Times* last week, however, there is no sufficiently clear tradition to tie the House to any course of action.

Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that the election of Speaker Boothroyd did end the precedent in the post-war period of the holder of the office always coming from the majority party. I would point out that, in part, Betty Boothroyd's success was the result of a recognition that the winner-takes-all rule that so often applies in our proceedings should not be employed in the election of the Speaker. It is for this reason that I would urge friends on the Government Benches to consider a candidate from ranks other than our own. In future Parliaments—certainly not the next one—it could be in the interests of a Labour Opposition to call on such a precedent.

That, however, is not the sole reason for proposing Ming Campbell; indeed, everything that I have said so far could apply to a member of the Conservative party. I happen to believe that Back Benchers—whose champion we expect the Speaker to be—will be better represented by someone from the most politically excluded of all groups; the minority party.

With nearly 50 Members—47 to be exact—the Liberal Democrats are not the minuscule minority that once they were. The increase in their numbers is in no small way due to the credibility of such Members as Menzies Campbell. In a bipartisan Chamber such as this, it is still no mean feat to achieve the status and authority that Ming Campbell now enjoys. His work in the House—and, in particular, in the areas of foreign affairs and security—has done much to contribute to the consensus in this country which has seen us through so many of the international travails of recent years.

It has been suggested that Menzies Campbell enjoys support from elsewhere in the Labour ranks, and that this may be to his disadvantage. As far as I am concerned, all I can say is that, on this subject, No. 10 has employed the same method of consultation as usual—namely, extra-sensory perception. Certainly, Ming has brought to his work in this House all the skills of advocacy that we would expect from a distinguished silk at the Scottish Bar.

However, the House needs more than the services of a hired legal gun in the post of Speaker and more than a mastery of procedure. We know that "Erskine May" is the guide and record of precedent, but not the sole repository of wisdom. We need a Speaker who can nudge and cajole the House, while never forgetting that if we the Members want—as I do—to end a lot of the flummery and the arcane procedures, such as the process of this election, it is up to us as Members to decide, and it is for the Speaker to ensure that our wishes become a reality. The House needs someone whose authority, independence and political acuity make them a match for the serried ranks of the Executive. Those who care for this House and its good standing must know that, in electing Menzies Campbell to be Speaker, we should be electing such a person. I urge my colleagues and friends to do so.

5.30 pm

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I am delighted to second the nomination of Menzies Campbell. He is a very old friend of mine. I have known him and his family—I almost planned to say "the Ming dynasty", but it did not sound so good this morning—much longer than my short time in this place.

I have learned already that there are four parts to the job of Speaker. I did not know until today that we were so much interested in holding the Executive to account. We have certainly had much time before this afternoon to do so. Nevertheless, we try to make the Speaker hold the Executive to account—at least to do his or her best to do so.

We also hope that the Speaker will make this a modern Chamber. It seems to me, as a relative newcomer, that much of our activity still belongs in the 19th century rather than the 21st. Although we may hope that a Speaker will modernise, he or she does not have the authority to do so.

The Speaker must also run a Department with a budget of £150 million. In some ways, I suppose that he or she is a chief executive behind closed doors.

Finally, in a role that has not been much touched on, the office of the Speaker is the focus for democratic parliamentary life in the world, as the mother or father of all Speakers.

To be a good Speaker, it seems that one needs to understand the nature of this place and to have lived in it long; to have immense wit and charm; to be quick-minded; and to have integrity, ability and great wisdom. I think that Menzies Campbell has those qualities in abundance. I urge the House to be different for a change and to allow a Liberal Democrat a chance to be passed the baton..

Sir Edward Heath: Mr. Menzies Campbell has been proposed and seconded, and I give him the opportunity to submit himself to the House if he so wishes.

5.31 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): I formally submit myself to the will of the House, and in doing so I should acknowledge that it is a great honour even to have been considered worthy of nomination.

As we have heard, it is customary to pay tribute to the previous Speaker, and this I gladly do along with all those who have already done so. Madam Speaker Boothroyd has left an indelible mark on this House of Commons. She may not have left a wig, but she has most certainly left a pair of particularly elegant shoes, which it will take someone of some character to aspire to fill.

I never expected to get to Westminster: I joined the Liberal party in 1959. That could hardly have been described as a promising career move. I entered the House only in 1987, at the fifth attempt. I began to feel that I was on course to test to destruction the myth of Robert the Bruce and the spider. My baptism as a candidate was in the general election of February 1974. I hope, Sir Edward, that you will not take offence at the recollection. To stand as a Liberal in a Labour-held west of Scotland industrial constituency took, may I say, a certain amount of independence.

Even when I became a candidate for my present constituency, it took three elections and 11 years to get here. I found, as others both before and since have found, that to be a Back Bencher is often a continual exercise in frustration. For those who have not had the experience, to be a Back Bencher as a member of a minority party is even more an exercise in frustration. It is self-evident to me that a Speaker drawn from a minority party would find it difficult not to reflect that experience in dealing with Back Benchers of all parties.

I am very grateful to my proposer and seconder for the generous way in which they have put the case on my behalf, and in terms—I suspect—rather better than I deserve. Much has been said and written in recent weeks about the relationship between the House and the Government and the Speaker. I have not issued a manifesto or attended hustings—not because I disapprove of them or those who have participated in them, but because I thought it right to conduct myself within existing conventions. I suspect that this will be the last election of any Speaker to which those conventions apply.

I shall now say a little about the relationships to which I have just referred. Our constitution is based on entitlements. I believe that the country is entitled to expect a House of Commons composed of Members of Parliament who will rigorously—and sometimes brutally—hold the Government to account. In turn, Members are entitled to a framework in which they can do that effectively. However, in my experience, it is the quality and the intensity of scrutiny that make scrutiny effective, and not necessarily the length of time devoted to it. I do not believe that overtired and harassed Members of Parliament, concerned about their families, are likely to fulfil that responsibility of scrutiny—or any of the other obligations imposed on us—as effectively as the electorate would want and are entitled to expect.

Being a Member of Parliament will never be a comfortable job—nor should it be. It is a job that requires sacrifices in return for the privileges it bestows. However, we should not regard self-inflicted discomfort as a badge of courage. Members of Parliament are entitled to something—or rather someone—else: a Speaker who will facilitate their holding the Government to account by using the powers of the Chair to their fullest extent for that purpose; a Speaker who will neither obstruct nor countenance any delay in reforms that the House in its wisdom may decide to implement.

The blunt, unvarnished truth is that, no matter how eloquent the words of proposers, seconders or even candidates themselves, the decision the House makes today is a matter of trust. A candidate who seems to be well qualified today might fail to fulfil expectations, and one who appears less qualified might grow into the job. To chair our proceedings, to manage the House of Commons Commission and to represent the House both at home and abroad—those are onerous responsibilities. If the House were to place its trust in me, I should strain every sinew to ensure that that trust was not misplaced.

Sir Edward Heath: The original Question was, "That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker", since when an amendment has been proposed to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. Menzies Campbell".

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 98, Noes 381.

Division No. 303] **[5.37 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Chidgey, David
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Denham, John
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flynn, Paul
Galbraith, Sam
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gidley, Sandra
Godman, Dr Norman A
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Grogan, John
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy

Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lock, David
Macdonald, Calum
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Major, Rt Hon John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mates, Michael
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thompson, William
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Webb, Steve
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Paul Keetch and
Mr. Don Foster.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brady, Graham
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Butterfill, John
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Chope, Christopher
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Evans, Nigel
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Edward
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Graham, Thomas
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hammond, Philip
Hanson, David
Hayes, John
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Key, Robert
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Letwin, Oliver
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Maples, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Maxton, John
May, Mrs Theresa
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian

Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Moss, Malcolm
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prior, David
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Spicer, Sir Michael
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, David
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilshire, David
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

5.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

6.5 pm

On resuming—

Sir Edward Heath: I call Mr. Maxton to move the amendment in favour of Dr. Clark.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Dr. David Clark".

I begin my remarks by making it clear that I add my voice to those who have expressed concerns about the way in which this election is taking place. That is in no way a criticism of you, Sir Edward, or the decision that you took. You have carried out your task so far with dignity, efficiency and fairness. However, in a modern democracy it is absurd that we should elect the Speaker of our legislature in such an arcane manner. We are elected by secret ballot; we should elect our Speaker in the same way. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) has made it clear that if elected as the new Speaker, he will ask the Procedure Committee to consider the matter urgently and produce a more efficient and fairer way in which to elect someone for this important post.

The election of the new Speaker of the House of Commons is always a significant event in the history of Parliament. Perhaps rarely has it had more significance than today. We have already seen more changes in our constitution in the past three and a half years than in the previous 50—the establishment of a Scottish Parliament, a Welsh Assembly and a London Assembly, and major changes in the House of Lords, with more to come. At the same time, the world outside is changing at an astonishing rate.

It is vital that as those changes take place, the House must change if it is not to become a quaint historic anachronism. We need a new Speaker who has the ability to control the House, to act as the chairman of an increasingly complex organisation and to be our ambassador both to the people who elect us and to the rest of the world. However, this time we must also elect a Speaker who will work with the House to change it and bring it fully into the 21st century. I believe that in my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields we would have such a Speaker.

The son of a gardener, my right hon. Friend left school at 16 to work in forestry. Attending night school, he obtained the qualifications necessary to enter Manchester university and to gain BA, MSc and PhD degrees. I mention that only to show that he has the determination and intelligence to succeed in any task that he is given. He first entered Parliament in 1970, when he was elected Member for Colne Valley. He lost that seat in 1974, but was returned in 1979 to represent South Shields. He has been the Member for South Shields ever since, and is thus one of the most experienced Members. He was a member of the shadow Cabinet for many years in opposition, covering several portfolios. In 1997 he was appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, in which post he served for a year. His work in bringing information

[Mr. John Maxton]

technology more rapidly into government and on the Freedom of Information Bill was appreciated by many of his colleagues, if not by all those in the Cabinet.

Since then my right hon. Friend has been a Back Bencher. He understands how the House of Commons works from both sides—as a member of the Executive and from the Back Benches. Despite perhaps feeling some resentment about the way in which he was treated, he has loyally supported the Government, but he has not done so with total blindness. He voted against those measures in the Freedom of Information Bill that he thought betrayed the concept that he advocated when in government.

I have known my right hon. Friend since he re-entered Parliament in 1979. Over the years I have learned to appreciate his quiet intelligence, his advice, his composure and his subtle humour. He will stay calm when the House is rowdy. He will avert impending rows with a quick wit. He will bring intelligence to all the decisions. He will take advice but remain his own man. Thus he has the attributes needed for any Speaker in any age. So do some of the other candidates who have been proposed, but my right hon. Friend would bring to the job an understanding of the modern world and the revolutionary changes that are transforming it. He knows that if the House is to retain the respect of those who elect us, it must change quickly.

The Speaker can play only a limited role in that. However, he can and must set the tone: lead change, not thwart it. He must work with others in the House to move us from the 18th and 19th centuries, where so many of our customs are stuck, into the democratic world of the 21st century. I believe that my right hon. Friend is the person best suited to do that.

6.11 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I wish to second the nomination of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark). I do so as someone who has never been a close friend or ally of his. Indeed, before we were all new Labour, he and I were on opposite wings of the party. However, he always had my respect as a person of integrity and ability who was willing to engage in debate and listen to the opponent's argument.

As others have said, today's election is about much more than who occupies the Speaker's Chair; it is about the role itself. While in this place, the Speaker must exercise his or her authority with dignity and impartiality. I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend would do so with courage and consistency. However, the Speaker usually occupies the Chair for only about 10 hours a week. Most of his or her powers are exercised behind closed doors. Our ability to act effectively as legislators depends profoundly on the Speaker's skills in creating the framework for debate and dealing with the usual channels.

Someone who has been in government working with the Chief Whip and Cabinet colleagues has the advantage of knowing the tricks of that trade. Someone who has been involuntarily returned to the Back Benches has an added advantage. As a Back Bencher, my right hon. Friend knows how difficult but vital it is to be an effective scrutineer. I have no doubt that he will use his considerable skills and experience to champion Back Benchers' interests.

For all those reasons, I support my right hon. Friend. I do so most of all because I want a Speaker who will lead the reform of the House, who will support a package of reforms that will deliver sensible working hours, and who understands that MPs should not have to set aside family responsibilities to do their job. It is emblematic of this place that we have a pink ribbon for our swords and paperclips for our letters, but no computers and no child care facilities.

My right hon. Friend has a long track record of support for modernisation. His is the most radical reform agenda before us today—an agenda that would revitalise the Chamber, quicken the pace of debate and deepen our scrutiny. Not only would that lead to more effective and fulfilling roles for Back Benchers and to better government, it might just lead to a revival of public interest and support. Far too many people see our Parliament as the preserve of political junkies playing out old rituals. Many of us will never be either the great stars or, I hope, the great bores of this place, but we all deserve to be heard without fear or favour when we represent our constituents and voice the concerns of ordinary people.

In my right hon. Friend we have a man who would enable us to exercise our democratic duties in this place in ways fit for the 21st century. I second the amendment in support of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields.

Sir Edward Heath: Dr. David Clark has been proposed and seconded. I now invite him to submit himself to the House if he so wishes.

6.15 pm

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): I willingly submit myself as a candidate for Speaker. I do so with considerable trepidation but with a feeling of great honour, because I am a House of Commons person. I believe passionately in representative democracy, and it is a great honour to be nominated. It is also unexpected, because a few months ago the thought had not even crossed my mind. It was only because a few colleagues suggested that I would be a suitable candidate that I felt it appropriate to allow my name to go forward.

The job of Speaker is obviously a difficult position to try to fill. Clearly, the two main demands of the job are almost contradictory. The Speaker is the servant of the House, but is at the same time the protector of the House—protecting it as an institution, protecting its reputation and protecting its Members. The job description is particularly challenging.

I would bring to the job judgment and integrity based on my belief in representative democracy. Several right hon. and hon. Members have highlighted the challenges that representative democracy faces today. I submit that we may need to do other things to meet some of those challenges.

I would also bring judgment and integrity based on experience. I came to the House rather unexpectedly in 1970—I was the only gain for my party at that election, but I was also the only loss for my party in 1974. I claim no credit; it was a pure accident. When I came to the House in 1970, we were nearer to the end of the second world war than to the new millennium. It has been brought home to me how the rest of the world has changed a great deal over the years, but although we have had changes in the House, we have not been as courageous as we might have been in modernising this institution sufficiently.

I bring 25 years' experience of the House. I sat for too long on the Opposition Front Bench and for too short a time on the Government Front Bench, but I shall not go on about that. I was proud to be in the Cabinet and to spearhead two aspects of Government policy: information technology and freedom of information. I passionately believed in that policy, not for any academic reasons, but for the simple reason that information technology and freedom of information enable Members of Parliament, as representatives of the people, to engage and re-engage our constituents, and to challenge those who try to undermine our representative democracy.

I have no illusions. I am one of those strange people who knew what it was like here but came back because I loved it so much. I was one of the retreads. Being an MP is not only a privilege, but a unique job. We all know that to do that job we need eight days a week and 25 hours a day—but we must now look at the way in which we arrange our working lives, so that we can better match the demands made of us by our constituents. The way in which we in the House appear on television often does not convey the message that we are businesslike, and I think we should think about that very deeply.

Select Committees are still young institutions, and I believe the time has come to strengthen them so that we can challenge the Executive. I was a member of the Executive, and I happen to believe that there is nothing wrong with being challenged robustly by a representative of the people. That, I think, is a counterbalance to the advice that one is given by civil servants.

I also believe that we must become much more family friendly, and I think we could do much more to try to achieve that.

I see the task as a difficult task. I see the task as a daunting task. I see the task as to speak up for the ordinary Member of Parliament. I also see the task as to give the Government space in which to govern, because if the Government cannot govern, the House will suffer as well. In the end it is a question of balance; it is a question of judgment; and in the end, the Speaker is merely a servant and a defender of the House.

I can pledge only this: I shall be my own man, and I shall fight for the rights of Members of the House—and by fighting for the rights of Members of the House, I shall fight for the rights of the citizens who send them to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 192, Noes 296.

Division No. 304] **[6.22 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Cleland, David
Cohen, Harry
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cran, James
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Denham, John
Drown, Ms Julia
Edwards, Huw
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Greenway, John
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Home Robertson, John
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
McDonnell, John
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
MacShane, Denis
Major, Rt Hon John
Maples, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prior, David
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ruddock, Joan
St Aubyn, Nick
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stringer, Graham
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*

Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, William
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Walley, Ms Joan
Walter, Robert
Wareing, Robert N
Wells, Bowen
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Terry Lewis and
Mr. Hilton Dawson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Brady, Graham
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Chisholm, Malcolm
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Crausby, David
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Day, Stephen
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Galloway, George
Gerrard, Neil
Goggins, Paul
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Hayes, John
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lammy, David
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Livsey, Richard
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLeish, Henry
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickles, Eric
Pickthall, Colin
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spellar, John
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Touhig, Don
Tredinnick, David
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and
Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

6.33 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. Nicholas Winterton".

We all know my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). More important, the country knows him as a man of courage and integrity. When I take schoolchildren around the House and we go to the Queen's Robing room, I point out that two frescoes are missing. Two of King Arthur's knightly virtues are not portrayed on the walls. I jokingly say to the constituents that it is no surprise because they are the two virtues that are the rarest among politicians—fidelity and courage.

My hon. Friend has both in abundance. Above all, he has shown through a long and distinguished career a total devotion to his constituents, a fidelity to Parliament and the courage at all times and in all circumstances to fight for them, to put them first and to put their interests before his own.

You will remember, Sir Edward, when my hon. Friend was elected to the House in September 1971. I remember thinking then that he had a great future and I think it still. Cometh the hour, cometh the man, and it is the hour when Parliament must choose an individual who will be respected throughout the country for his devotion to Parliament.

My hon. Friend has had a long apprenticeship and in any normal walk of life that would be an advantage. It should be here. After all, he showed when he took Sir Arthur Vere Harvey's seat at the by-election a professionalism that is the hallmark of politics today. Not for nothing did he win his seat in the 1967 Warwickshire county council election. Not for nothing did he fight two losing campaigns in Newcastle-under-Lyme and then come to a by-election, which is the crucible of politics, in Macclesfield and win. He fought and he won.

My hon. Friend was of the generation that you will understand, Sir Edward: those of us who had their formative experiences in the armed forces of the Crown. You were a gunner, I flew aeroplanes, and my hon. Friend was in tanks. There is no more demanding environment than to be in a tank and to learn to get on with all sorts of conditions and people. It has been my hon. Friend's characteristic throughout his career.

There have been differences with those who set the Government's agenda; there have been differences of opinion with respected colleagues; but always my hon. Friend has fought with integrity for his point of view and above all for the interests of his constituents. When he came to the hustings, and I think that those who came to the hustings should have priority in our attentions, he twice used an important word: "integrity". That is what we demand of the Speaker.

The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) pointed out the challenges that Parliament faces. It is a fact that the integrity of Parliament is coming increasingly into question. No one has ever impugned my hon. Friend's integrity. He has shown, for example, on the Select Committee on Health, which he chaired, a total devotion to getting the health service right, even if that was unpopular in Government circles.

My hon. Friend has also been notable as senior member of the Speaker's Panel. I served with him briefly when he chaired the Committee considering the Greater London Authority Act 1999. There could have been no other measure harder to chair in the previous Session, but he did it with fairness, good humour and great wisdom.

Last but not least, my hon. Friend has an interest in international affairs. He has championed the democratic rights of the Falkland islanders. He was formerly the chairman of the Falkland Islands all-party group of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and a member of the CPA executive. It is symbolic. Although the Falkland Islands has perhaps the smallest legislature of the member countries of the Commonwealth, my hon. Friend took on the challenge and supported it.

Not only does our Speaker have to be a household word in the land, and have a voice that will carry with conviction—as my hon. Friend's will—to all the corners of the country, but he must have the personality to represent the United Kingdom around the globe. Speaker Boothroyd's last activity as Speaker was to go to Ukraine and to the Baltic states, and what better ambassadress could we have had? I doubt that we could possibly have had a better one. However, if my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield goes to such places, he will take not only a different style, but my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton)—who, as the lady of integrity that she is, undoubtedly will pay her own way.

I warmly commend my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield to the House and ask the House to support the amendment.

Sir Edward Heath: I call Mr. Stephen Pound to second the amendment.

6.41 pm

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Of all the speeches that we have heard in this long and winding day, as we meander with a mazy motion through this labyrinth of protocol and procedure, the one that seemed to find most favour with the House was that of the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), who stood up and said that he was not standing. Although I have been tempted by the throne myself—any job that involves an element of hair covering has its attractions to me—I should like to rule myself out for all time. Nevertheless, I am honoured to second the nomination of the hon. and gallant Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton).

There are those who—unkindly, unfairly and outrageously—say that the only ground for nominating the hon. and gallant Gentleman to the Speaker's Chair is to shut him up. I will have no truck with that—although I have heard more than I wish to know about the Congleton to Macclesfield bypass. The House would be deprived of an original, fresh and idiosyncratic voice were the hon. and gallant Gentleman to become Speaker, but that is no reason not to support him.

Today, the hon. and gallant Gentleman, with the individualism that characterises his every word, described himself as a "traditionalist-progressive". I took that not as an oxymoron, to mean a revolutionary reactionary or something like that, but as an expression of his wish to combine the best of both worlds. He is a traditionalist, in that he undoubtedly reveres and respects the great traditions of this great House, but he is also sufficiently progressive to realise that nothing stands still, that nothing must stand still, and that even an institution such as this one can and—dare I say it—must improve.

[Mr. Stephen Pound]

Can there be a finer example of that combination of qualities than the hon. and gallant Gentleman's chairmanship of the Select Committee on Health, when—in an alliance almost as unlikely as that between the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) and me—with the late and greatly missed Audrey Wise, the Committee produced the report on maternity services? It was one of the most ground-breaking and revolutionary reports that the House has ever seen, taking the interests of the woman to be paramount.

It is no secret—even to hon. Members who have been elected to the House recently and have no glorious tradition of coming in and out of the House or various by-elections to refer to—that the forces of the then Government were not pleased with the hon. and gallant Gentleman. They even—I do not know whether this is unparliamentary language—manoeuvred him from the chairmanship of that Committee.

While the hon. and gallant Gentleman chaired that Committee, he sought neither to find favour with the Government nor to curry favour with the Opposition. However, he represented the voices of women and of ordinary Back Benchers. That particular example shows how the man can go beyond what some unfairly see as his stereotypic presentation.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood referred to the hon. and gallant Gentleman as a household name. As is well known, I am not even a household name in my own household. Nevertheless, I can offer a view on the hon. and gallant Gentleman from the perspective of the most lowly worm.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood also mentioned the Committee that considered the Greater London Authority Act 1999, which had more than 1,000 amendments and clauses. That legislation was steered through by the hon. and gallant Gentleman not only with great good humour, but, above all, with an unfailing and irrefragable respect for the lowliest Back Bencher. Even the most newly arrived Back Benchers had their chance to speak on that Committee. Although, in my case, that fact was regretted as soon as I had spoken, he thought sufficiently of us and our rights to ensure that we were able to do that.

Although I would not claim to be as one with the hon. and gallant Gentleman politically—he is a tad liberal for my taste—as the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood said, in his every action, both within and outside this place, there has been an unbroken line of integrity and of unflinching and unchanging morality. That is precisely the type of quality that one looks for in the Speaker of this place.

It has also been said, somewhat ungraciously, that if we were to elect the hon. and gallant Gentleman as Speaker, we would have a Bill and Hillary scenario in which we would be getting two for the price of one. I would not in any way compare the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) with the President and the First Lady of the United States of America.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): Who would be Monica?

Mr. Pound: I shall not mention the name that I just heard from the Cleethorpes side of the House.

The hon. and gallant Gentleman and the hon. Member for Congleton are a team, and we have seen that team in action. We have also come to respect that team. It matters not whether we agree or disagree with them, they work well together.

Today, however, we are considering the case for the hon. and gallant Gentleman. I think that that case is proven. He is the man whom no Government functionary would ever choose for Speaker. He is a paid-up member—he is almost the shop steward—of the awkward squad. I see that he is sitting next to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who would have been the first choice for Speaker of many of the more iconoclastic hon. Members.

Nevertheless, for all that we find the hon. and gallant Gentleman occasionally to be brutish if not short in his contributions, none of us would doubt for a moment that he speaks his mind without fear or favour. He never ceases to represent his constituents to his best. Every single time that he has been put to the test in relation to the rights of the Back Bencher against those of the Executive, the Back Bencher has won out.

From my worm's eye perspective, I have great pleasure in seconding the nomination of the hon. Member for Macclesfield, and have probably cost myself a lot of friends in doing so—*[Interruption.]* It is said that that pre-supposes that I had any friends to start with.

Sir Edward Heath: Mr. Nicholas Winterton has been proposed and seconded. I give him the opportunity to submit himself to the House.

6.50 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Thank you, Sir Edward, for giving me the opportunity of submitting myself to the will of the House.

Sir Edward, I think that I am right in saying that you entered the House of Commons in 1950 when Earl Winterton was the Father of the House, and I entered the House when you were Prime Minister. Whether either of those facts will do me any good today, I have my doubts.

I am now in my 30th year of unbroken service, and I have served for all that period, for whatever reason—as I said at the hustings this morning—as a Back Bencher in this House of Commons. For me, the House of Commons, its institutions and its Committees have been my total political life, and I have enjoyed it through all its vicissitudes. In many ways, I share the view of Edmund Burke, who said:

> You choose a member indeed, but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol but he is a Member of Parliament.

That is what I have sought to be.

Of course, I accept, as my seconder, the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) said, that constituency duties and responsibilities and heavy involvement have become increasingly important since Edmund Burke represented Bristol. The parliamentary timetable and the parliamentary week should take those matters into account. Whoever takes the Chair has the prime and vital task not only of guaranteeing the meaningful independence and integrity of the House but, as my proposer and seconder have already said, of safeguarding the rights and concerns of every Member, irrespective of political party affiliations or, in the case of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), of none.

The hon. Member for Ealing, North was very generous in referring to my chairmanship of the Committee considering the Greater London Authority Bill. In addition, as the longest-serving member of the Speaker's Panel, I hope that I have established a record of total impartiality, integrity and independence. My time chairing the Select Committee on Health has been referred to. It was a fantastic Committee because of the co-operation of all its members, who were seeking to do the job that Select Committees are there to do.

Speaker Boothroyd rightly emphasised that the requirement of effective scrutiny and the democratic process must take priority over the convenience of Members. However, let me say to those on both Front Benches that that is a message not to Back Benchers, who are burdened with long hours, but to the Government, who should not seek to put too much badly drafted legislation through the Commons in unseemly haste, riding roughshod over the legislature in the process.

I would welcome more private notice questions from Back Benchers as part of their individual responsibility of holding the Government to account and representing their constituencies. Let us modernise our procedures where that can be done without undermining the essential roles of amending legislation and opposition. Although Lord Randolph Churchill said that the duty of an Opposition is to oppose, opposition does not come simply from Opposition parties—it sometimes comes from within political parties. Such opposition should be heard and given a say, otherwise Parliament will become a pathetic poodle of the Government of the day and of the establishment. That is not the purpose of this place.

The Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons, on which I sit, and the Select Committee on Procedure, which I have the honour to chair, have both contributed to bringing the procedures and practices of this place more up to date. I am convinced that they will continue to do so. Having been, as it were, almost challenged by a previous candidate, I am sure that the Procedure Committee, whatever the outcome of the speakership election, will wish to consider the Standing Orders covering the election of the Speaker.

I was questioned on my next point this morning at the hustings. Despite my initial reservations about it, the Westminster Hall experiment has, in my view, been a great success. The Speaker of the House has always had the opportunity to comment on, and contribute to, the continuing debate on modernisation and changes in procedure. I am in favour of a Speaker's Conference, but the Speaker is the servant of the House and the House, surely, is its own master, as long as it is prepared to exercise that power. Again, I share the view of Edmund Burke, who said:

> The people never give up their liberties but under some delusion.

Surely it is the Speaker's difficult task to guard against such delusion, not only in the House's dealings with the Executive, but in respect of outside bodies, international organisations and, as was said earlier, large corporations.

In the 30 years that I have been a Member of this House, I have experienced the art and intrigue of the Executive—I fear to my disadvantage. However, it did me a lot of good because it merely encouraged me to defend the rights of Back Benchers and the role of Parliament all the more robustly. Let us use the Select Committees more positively, as the Liaison Committee has recommended, not only to hold the Government of the day to account, but to assist the Government to produce better drafted and considered legislation through the production of draft Bills and the development of business sub-committees for the proper programming of the Standing Committee stage of Bills.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) for his supportive and generous remarks in proposing me. Like me, he has always been a Back Bencher, and he believes fervently in the role and purpose of this House. I also thank the hon. Member for Ealing, North for his most entertaining and flamboyant speech. It was a pleasure to listen to it, not just because I was involved, but because it was a very good contribution. He was forthright and positive, and I was delighted at the way in which he seconded me. We got to know each other well during the Committee stage of the Greater London Authority Bill, on which he spoke with great commitment and knowledge.

Finally, it is a great honour even to be proposed and seconded as Speaker. I think that there is a great deal more that Members wish to say. I hope that the House, in considering the nominations for Speaker, will be zealous in its power, role and integrity. I guarantee and promise that I will strive to uphold that authority whenever abuses and threats are made to the integrity of this House. Let us use the new millennium to help to rebuild the power and authority of our parliamentary democracy in this House. I offer myself as the servant and the voice of the House.

Sir Edward Heath: The original question was, "That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker", since when an amendment has been proposed to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. Nicholas Winterton".

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 116, Noes 340.

Division No. 305] **[7 pm**

AYES

Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Drew, David
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Fabricant, Michael
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hayes, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Kirkbride, Miss Julie

Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mitchell, Austin
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tipping, Paddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Wilkinson and
Mr. Stephen Pound.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brake, Tom
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali

Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

7.12 pm

Mr. Jamie Cann (Ipswich): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. John McWilliam".

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. McWilliam) became an MP in 1979. I arrived rather later, in 1992, and bumped into him almost immediately. He befriended me and became my mentor; he taught me all I know—not much, some would say, but he did his best. That is all that one can ask of a friend.

We were friends too when we were both members of the Select Committee on Defence and we went to Bosnia—it was in December or January and the temperature was about 15 deg below. Our party split up. I was sent up the mountain—three hours up the mountain—to visit Royal Engineers who were based in a derelict factory. I was there for two days. Funnily enough, John was in the warmth of Banja Luka in the battalion headquarters mess. However, our friendship survived that.

I am not asking hon. Members to vote for John because he is my friend, but for three main reasons. The first is his varied experience in the House. At present, he is Chairman of the Committee of Selection, so I advise Members to be nice to him. In opposition, he was shadow deputy Leader of the House. He has been a senior Labour Whip—so he knows where the bodies are buried—he has served on numerous Select Committees; he has been a senior member of the Speaker's Panel of Chairmen; and he is one of the Deputy Speakers in Westminster Hall.

In all those jobs, he has shown himself to be efficient and friendly and firm but fair. When people tell me that he is a hard Chairman, I say that, yes, he is a hard Chairman, but he is fair because he is hard with everybody—if they deserve it.

Secondly, John McWilliam's career has not just been inside the House; it has been outside too. Hon. Members would not think so to look at him, because he does not look old enough, but he came to this place in 1979. Before that, he had attended Napier college and Herriot-Watt college studying courses in science and technology. For several years, he was a telecommunications engineer. He was a member of the regional council of his union. For a period, he was treasurer of Edinburgh city council and he was an audit commissioner in Scotland. He has experience inside and outside this place.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend is not just a man of public affairs—he is an angler; he walks; he reads; he is a historian; he likes music; he has a wife and daughters; he has a huge, slavering dog; he lives in his constituency; he is a man of the people—one might say that he is a man in the round. Too many people in this place have become institutionalised. He loves the place, but it does not have a grip on him as it does on some others—taking us away from contact with the ordinary people whom we represent.

All in all, my hon. Friend is a man who is well qualified for the onerous duties of the Speaker. I urge hon. Members to support the amendment.

7.17 pm

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): I am delighted to second the nomination of John McWilliam as Speaker of the House. John is a truly genuine moderniser, with a clear understanding of the benefits as well as the limitations of modern technology and with a wealth of experience of the procedures of the House. He has been—I shall now read a huge list—a former shadow deputy Leader of the House, a senior Labour Whip, a member of the Speaker's Panel of Chairmen and a Deputy Speaker in the new Westminster Hall. He sat on the Select Committees on Defence and on Liaison. Currently, he is chairman of the all-party parliamentary information technology group.

[Mrs. Helen Brinton]

Before entering Parliament in 1979, as Member for Blaydon, John McWilliam worked as a telecommunications engineer and served as a regional council member of the communications workers union. He is a former city treasurer of Edinburgh. He has a wealth of experience not only inside the House, but, more important—because we need to relate to people outside—of the world outside.

What is important to me and to Members on both sides of the House is that John is a fair and independent-minded colleague, who has a clear understanding of the procedures of the House. That is absolutely vital for the job of Speaker.

I have known John as a colleague for many years and have always found him to be both impartial and fair. Indeed, when I first served on a Committee that he chaired, he was quick and clear in calling me to order—despite our friendship—and in instructing me about House and Committee procedures.

John understands the nonsense in procedure. More important, he understands how to put it right. He defends from the Chair the right of Back Benchers and minorities to have their say. Sometimes, he is prepared to do that not in a pussyfooting way, but in a very outspoken way indeed—in the tradition of Speakers Weatherill, Thomas and Boothroyd.

It is my belief that we should now accept that we are actually in the 21st century—not in the 18th—and that it is time that the occupant of the Speaker's Chair was seen to embody modern principles. John McWilliam is such a person. I believe that he has the courage and the drive to transform the House as it enters the 21st century.

For example, in this age of equality and the striving towards it, it is vital that we have facilities for families, babies and older children so that women—and, yes, men—are not put off entering the House and playing the fullest part in it. That is something that I feel very strongly about. I know that Members on both sides—both male and female—also feel strongly about it.

I am very pleased that there is now a technical solution, which has been suggested and supported by my hon. Friend, to the problem of a Member feeding her child while serving in Committee or taking part in a debate in the Chamber. A Room on the Committee Corridor and one adjacent to the Chamber could be set aside so that individual Members can feed their children and be kept up with the debate while they are away from it. My hon. Friend also believes that it is high time that we had a creche and a more predictable parliamentary year that is more geared to school holidays. I know that many Members on both sides—both male and female—would welcome that.

I believe that we need a senior, experienced Member in the Speaker's Chair who, while understanding and honouring the traditions of the House, has a real vision of how it must change in the future and who commands respect across all the parties. That is why I ask hon. Members to support John McWilliam today.

Sir Edward Heath: Mr. John McWilliam has been proposed and seconded. I give him the opportunity to submit himself to the House.

7.21 pm

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): Thank you, Sir Edward, for this opportunity. It is a great honour and privilege to submit myself to the House and to my peers, a vast number of whom have suffered from or enjoyed my chairmanship over many years. I have always sought to be firm, I have always sought to be fair and I have always applied Standing Orders, even those with which I did not agree.

I have also always sought to make certain that the views of individual Members—regardless of their party and regardless of how aberrant those views might appear to their party or how popular those views might be—have been properly aired and that Members have listened to them. One of the worst things that we can do is shout down our colleagues and not to listen to them, and one of the most terrible things that Parliament could ever do would be to stifle debate and to stop the discussion of ideas with which we might not agree. However, the worst thing of all would be to produce a House that did not have clear, vigorous, entertaining and informative debates in which principles were not clearly enunciated. It is sometimes difficult to ensure that debate does not degenerate into mere personal abuse, but, if one uses one's common sense, such problems can be headed off.

Speaker Boothroyd is a splendid example and the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) said that her shoes would be very hard to fill. I am afraid that they will not fit those of us who are left in the race, because I am fairly certain that no one has shoes that size. Speaker Boothroyd's will be a hard act to follow because Betty was a good friend, a superb Speaker, a marvellous servant of the House and a superb ambassador in the rest of the world for democratic politics. She also worked very hard in the Commonwealth to promote the speakership and the role of democracy. It will be an incredibly hard act to follow, but it is a pleasure, at least, to be given the opportunity to put my name forward so that my colleagues can judge whether I am a suitable candidate.

Criticisms have been made that the House has become a poodle and a creature of the Executive. The Speaker can only lead in trying to counter such a development, because it is up to individual Members to have the courage to stand up and follow that lead if they do not want the House to be brought into disrepute. There are people in the governance of the country—not elected Members and not the Government, but people in the civil service and other institutions—who would dearly love to suppress the influence of Members and that of the House. That is something against which we must all fight, but it is up to the courage and the will of individual Members to do that. As I said, the Speaker can only lead.

Those Members who think that I unfairly called them to order in the past now have a chance for revenge, but those who are genuinely contrite about the fact that they were out of order now have a chance to show that contrition. I submit myself to the House.

Sir Edward Heath: The original Question was, "That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker", since when an amendment has been proposed to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. John McWilliam".

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 30, Noes 309.

Division No. 306] **[7.26 pm**

AYES

Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cann, Jamie
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Cummings, John
Dalyell, Tam
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Day, Stephen
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Hunter, Andrew
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Llwyd, Elfyn
McDonnell, John
McWilliam, John
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Pickles, Eric
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thompson, William
White, Brian
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Helen Brinton and
Mr. Eric Martlew.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashton, Joe
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brake, Tom
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clappison, James
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Crausby, David
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Graham, Thomas
Green, Damian
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Major, Rt Hon John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Oaten, Mark
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prior, David
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad

Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spellar, John
Spicer, Sir Michael
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Tyrie, Andrew
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

7.37 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael. J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. Michael Lord".

I have pleasure in moving the amendment proposing that my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North (Mr. Lord) should occupy the position of Speaker in this House. I am sure that I am not the only hon. Member who, as we approach the end of this marathon performance, is unhappy about the procedure used and the manner in which it is evolving, and uneasy about the way in which we have moved through the various stages. With great respect to my hon. Friends the Members for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) and for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), as well as other hon. Members in favour of whom an amendment may be moved, we are now moving into a possible contest between two current Deputy Speakers.

This electorate has been described as sophisticated. The House will be pleased to know that that certainly shortens my speech, as no one has any excuse for not knowing the qualities of my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North, having been able to observe him in the Chair—that is the fairest judgment that the House can make. I have great admiration for Betty Boothroyd, but in a sense she did the House a disservice, as she may have concealed from it the difficulties involved in the role of Speaker, which she carried off with considerable aplomb and skill. I have had the privilege of serving in the House for more than 30 years, and have seen six Speakers in the Chair, three from the Conservative party and three from the Labour party. I observed their characters and the different and considerable qualities that they brought to the position of Speaker. At one time or another, I witnessed each Speaker risk losing both the confidence of the House and control of it. Hon. Members who have seen only Betty Boothroyd in the Chair may not appreciate how fragile order is in the House, and may not realise how challenging and difficult the job of Speaker is.

Most of the early comments in the debate were rather inaccurate, but our remarks are becoming more accurate as we become better informed. For instance, hon. Members have referred to the tradition of alternating between the parties. That is not correct. The reality is that the Government party has tended to nominate the Speaker, and that rule was broken only in the case of Betty Boothroyd.

Speakers have sometimes come in in the mid-term of a Parliament and sometimes at a new Parliament. I have not found a case where a Speaker has come in in the last year of a Parliament. Every Member knows that this will be a difficult, contentious, argumentative and lively Session—possibly the last of this Parliament. It will be exceptionally challenging for the occupant of the Chair. Good humour, common sense and basic courage will be needed, as well as the qualities for which everyone has called: impartiality, fairness, integrity and respect for the traditions of the House. Those will be needed in full measure. It is the most daunting time at which to take over the responsibility of the Chair and the good name of this Parliament.

I am concerned about how this Parliament will proceed because our democracy depends ultimately on the willingness of this House to accept order and the authority of the Chair. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed) is to second the motion. I understand that the fact that he sports a black eye at the moment has nothing to do with the tensions of this contest; he may have some more to say about how he incurred that injury.

I make no personal criticism of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin), who has occupied the Chair. However, it is interesting that he and the last candidate were the only two whose proposer and seconder came exclusively from the Labour side. On earlier occasions, the importance of a candidate having bipartisan support has been clear. The way in which the election may go is no secret, and I worry as to whether the integrity of the bipartisan approach can be sustained. That is no criticism of individuals or of their impartiality; it is an unfortunate feature of the present situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North will speak for himself; I will not detain the House by discussing his qualities. I would not be standing here if I did not have a high regard for his abilities. However, I did not know whether he would be any good as a Deputy Speaker. I was pleased when he was proposed to be a Deputy Speaker because he had been a Back Bencher, served on Select Committees and been on the Chairman's Panel. In my humble experience in life, I have found that one does not really know how people will perform in a particular role—whatever their qualifications, hopes and ambitions, or the enthusiasm of their supporters—until one actually sees them doing it.

Every single Member has seen my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North in the Chair. If they consider him to be a candidate,

his qualification is that he has been able to show how he would discharge that responsibility in the Chair. In the present circumstances, I happen to believe that he is the best candidate to occupy the Chair. I have the greatest pleasure in proposing him.

Sir Edward Heath: I call on the seconder, Mr. Andrew Reed.

7.45 pm

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): It is always humbling to speak in this House, and I feel honoured to take part on a day such as today. However, as a new Member, I would like to think that I can read the mood of the House and I will therefore keep my comments extremely short.

I am appalled at the way in which we have conducted our business today. This is a House matter and one on which we thought that, at last, the House could have its say. The way in which we have conducted our business has made the Football Association look competent in finding an England manager. With a new Speaker and a new House, there will be an opportunity to make sure that, in future, we do not have to go through this ridiculous and ludicrous process again.

I agreed to second the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North (Mr. Lord) and I was told that it would be a good clean fight. That has been the case and everyone who has spoken today is to be congratulated on the way in which they have conducted themselves.

In a sense, I should be grateful to the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North for not recognising me very early in my time in the House. Fortunately, it was not in this Chamber that our paths first crossed. I play rugby, which is the explanation for the black eye that I am sporting today. I played on Saturday and came a bit of a cropper with my opposite fly-half, who had absolutely not a scratch to show for the elbow that he managed to put in my eye. *[Interruption.]* No, it was not my wife, who I hope is watching.

I first met the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North at a game between the parliamentary rugby team from this House and our colleagues from New Zealand, held at Salford rugby league ground. On the previous evening, we had used the Granada studios to hold a mock debate with our New Zealand compatriots to show what things were really like. I was the only Member of Parliament from our House; the rest were others from the parliamentary team. Unfortunately, I was the only person on our team whom the hon. Gentleman did not recognise that evening.

The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North has made amends for that in the time that we have spent since in building our friendship through the all-party rugby union group, of which he is president and I am secretary, and—just as important for both of us in terms of the way in which we share our faith—the parliamentary Christian fellowship.

There are some great strengths to be brought to the post of Speaker. Like most Back Benchers, I have spent my time trying to catch the Speaker's eye well past prime time—as this evening, in the seven to nine o'clock slot. It is at that stage that we appreciate the work of all the Deputy Speakers, who keep us in order. More important for those of us who feel that we have a contribution to make, the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North—and the other Deputy Speakers, to be fair—have always made sure that we have had a fair hearing and a chance to get our point of view across.

The skills that are required for the job include integrity, honesty and the need to make sure that Back Benchers' views are heard. Those of who us intend to stay on the Back Benches a little longer would want those to continue. The Speaker's is an extremely difficult job, particularly—as the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said—at this time in a Parliament. It will not be easy for someone to slot into the position as we go into a general election, when the heated debates that we see at Prime Minister's Questions are carried over into other debates in the House.

I hear that the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North has been described as "solid". I am not sure whether some of those who have said that have meant it negatively or positively. However, at this crucial stage in the Parliament, that quality will make a positive contribution to the way in which the House is run. The hon. Gentleman's integrity, and the trust that people have in him, mean that he will be able to conduct the business of the House efficiently. He will make sure that every one of us has a role to play in bringing the Executive to account.

There has been a lot of talk today about modernisation. With a young son aged 18 months, I would be one of the first to say that the hours of the House need to be organised so that we can at least see our families more often and in a better way than we do currently. That would also allow us to serve our constituents much better. We could spend time learning about things in our constituencies, and could bring them to the House when scrutinising Bills. The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North has made clear his support for modernisation, but every candidate has done so. It is down to us as a House at last to grasp the issue. We failed to do so earlier today when we were not even able to secure a vote on the way in which we have treated ourselves today.

I hope that the new Speaker will allow the House to take the matter by the neck and to sort it out over the next six months. I hope that, following the general election, we return to a House of which the British people can be proud, and which they can understand—for at the moment, they do not. Watching today's debate, they will be horrified that we are spending such a long time going round in circles yet again. I hope that this election will be the catalyst for such changes. I believe that the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North has the skills to steer the House through a very difficult period and I recommend him to the House.

Sir Edward Heath: Mr. Michael Lord has been proposed and seconded, and I give him the opportunity to submit himself to the House if he so wishes.

7.51 pm

Mr. Michael Lord (Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North): I am happy to submit myself to the House for the election of Speaker. After not being allowed to address the House for three and a half years, it seems strange to be doing so. It was not always thus, as hon. Members will know. Originally, the Speaker was just as his title

[Mr. Michael Lord]

suggested, and represented the House's views to the sovereign of the day. Today, in speaking for the first time for a long time, I speak not on behalf of my constituents but for myself, which I find extremely difficult to do.

I should first like to thank my proposer and seconder for their encouragement, support and very kind words. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) is one of the wisest and most senior Members. His encouraging me to put my name forward and his staunch support throughout have been invaluable. The hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed), my friend, is not quite so senior but has many other things on his side—and I do not just mean youth. He has integrity and sincerity, and I know will go on to make huge contributions in the House. Despite his black eye, he is very gentle. I am truly grateful to both Members.

I should like to pay a brief tribute to our previous Speaker, Betty Boothroyd. It was a great honour and privilege to serve as one of her Deputy Speakers. Her advice was invaluable, her support for all her deputies unwavering. Most of all, as I know the House will agree, she was fun. She will be hugely missed by both the House and the nation, and I hope that she enjoys her retirement.

Our previous Speaker was famous for her high kicks in years gone by. Although I cannot possibly match her high kicks on the stage, I have in my time been responsible for many a high kick on the rugby field. If there is one unique thing about me among the candidates, it is that I am the only one who has played rugby against the South African Springboks. It is not a happy experience, from which one is lucky to emerge with only a black eye.

Perhaps it was on the sports field that my basic instinct for fairness was reinforced. To continue briefly in that sporting vein, applying it to the House of Commons, any referee worth his salt appreciates the need to judge quickly the mood of the game, not to interfere unnecessarily and to allow the game to flow. At the same time, of course, he must always maintain control without having to resort to red cards.

A memory, too, is important to the Speaker of the House. I do not know whether hon. Members realise that that was not always so. There was a time when the Speaker simply pointed to a Member without having to know their name. On one occasion, in its infinite wisdom, the House chose a cross-eyed Speaker. Every time the Speaker pointed, three people stood up. Since then, we have had to remember Members' names.

This is not the occasion on which to deal in detail with the problems that the House of Commons faces. The next Speaker, whoever that may be, will want to champion the rights of Back Benchers, ensure proper scrutiny of Government and maintain the importance of the House at the centre of our nation's democracy and decision making. I, too, would certainly want to take up those challenges as toughly as anyone who has spoken today.

This is the mother of Parliaments and in many ways it is still the envy of the world. The beauty of our system lies in its simplicity. Each Member works for and listens to their constituents, coming to the House of Commons to speak on their behalf. Although we are in the Palace of Westminster, this is a simple House of Commons. If Members of Parliament are doing their jobs properly and are heard in the House, we surely have the simplest and best possible form of government. Back Benchers must be heard, and more often than they are at present. Their voices should be heard in more parts of our daily affairs.

I am particularly tired of the constant belittling of this House and the denigration of its Members by some sections of the press. The House and its new Speaker should, as far as they are able, do everything possible to counteract that tendency, which creates an entirely false impression of the work that we do here and of the quality of Members of Parliament. Such a tendency is a very corrosive influence in our national life.

Three and a half years ago, the House entrusted me with the role of Deputy Speaker, which I have thoroughly enjoyed. For three and a half years, all Members have seen me do that job. Only they know which qualities they want in the next Speaker. If they decide that I have those qualities, and decide to trust me, I will do everything in my power to repay that trust. I do not believe that the House will be disappointed.

Sir Edward Heath: The original Question was, "That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker", since when an amendment has been proposed to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. Michael Lord".

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 146, Noes 290.

Division No. 307] **[7.57 pm**

AYES

Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hayes, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lord, Michael

Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Stinchcombe, Paul
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Tipping, Paddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tom King and
Mr. Andrew Reed.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*

Rogers, Allan
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

8.10 pm

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Sir Patrick Cormack".

It is a privilege to propose the name of my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) for election as Speaker.

The election comes at a time which is particularly important for Parliament, and therefore and by definition for the future of the democratic process in our country. The House, in the words of *The Times* leader last Friday, has become

> increasingly sidelined by the executive, the courts, the media and by Europe.

Perhaps there has not been a time in its history when it has been more in need of a doughty defender, who by definition would him or herself be a defender of the voice of the electorate between elections, because that is what the House should be.

The successful candidate should therefore be able to demonstrate, first, independence and impartiality. That my hon. Friend has consistently done so throughout his more than 30 years as a Member, is a fact to which his colleagues, and perhaps more particularly successive generations of Whips, can certainly attest. However, through his work for *The House Magazine*, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the all-party arts and heritage group, his impartiality is also well known and respected by Members on both sides of the House.

My hon. Friend has a well-earned reputation for his respect for Parliament, his knowledge of parliamentary procedure and his desire at all times that the House, when appropriate, should have its say and also its way. In a note circulated to all colleagues he states as his prime purpose to do what he can

> to restore Parliament to the centre of the nation's public life and the Chamber to the centre of Parliament's.

He is on record, passim in the *Official Report*, but also in his own publications, as being passionate about the centrality of the House to the democratic process.

My hon. Friend recognises of course that all successful institutions must adapt to changing times, but in the case of Parliament, only in a way which enhances and not diminishes its democratic role. It is at this moment in its history that the House needs a passionate defender of its rights, and those of its Members, and I strongly believe that my hon. Friend has both the passion and the strength required.

Clearly the qualities that my hon. Friend so obviously possesses would be of little use had he not also demonstrated for many years now his ability and authority in the Chair. As a member of the Chairmen's Panel from 1983 to 1997, he has won respect and admiration for his fairness, patience and knowledge.

The route to the Speaker's Chair can take at least two paths. There is the one which leads via the Government or Opposition Front Bench, for which there are certainly distinguished precedents or—I believe this to be more correct and preferable—the one leading from a multiplicity of Back-Bench activities. I make that point because I see the role of Speaker, as does my hon. Friend, as defender of the House against the Executive when such a defence is needed.

As a former member of the Modernisation Committee, my hon. Friend has a positive attitude to improving procedure and protecting and enhancing the role of Back Benchers. He rightly believes, however, that such change is a matter for the House itself, working through a Speaker's Conference that he would initiate.

Finally, the House has become accustomed, during the period in office of Madam Speaker Boothroyd, to colour, wit and humour in the Chair. It would be sad if her successor as the representative of parliamentary democracy in our country—that representative role is increasingly important—were not able to demonstrate likewise colour, wit and humour. That my hon. Friend would certainly be able to do. I urge the House to support the amendment.

8.14 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Let us be candid: few of my right hon. and hon. Friends think that the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) is a paragon of virtue.

Mr. Pound: No!

Mr. Dalyell: My hon. Friend denies that.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire has a tendency towards pomposity, but that is not unique in this assembly. There are 649 others who have a tendency towards pomposity.

However, the hon. Gentleman has some rare virtues. First, those who have sat under him in Committee know that he is a formidable and fair Chairman. He is also a distinguished member of the Speaker's Panel. When working under him in Committee, one understands that he has qualities that should be considered for the speakership. Those of us who were at the hustings this morning organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) will recognise that the hon. Gentleman gave a performance of considerable quality.

I suppose, secondly, that this is a delicate matter as far as you and I are concerned, Sir Edward, but the hon. Gentleman has another quality, and that is that he is a brave man. He was brave enough on many occasions to take on Margaret Thatcher in her heyday. He defied her on the abolition of the Greater London council and on many other matters during those years. These are things that we do not forget. When we are in the adversity of opposition, it is heartening to see some Members sticking up for what they think is right, against a formidable Prime Minister and a disciplinarian machine that is backing her up. That is why many Labour Members have a great deal of time for the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Gentleman, thirdly, would represent the House in a distinguished way when the Speaker goes abroad. As a member of the all-party arts and heritage group—I hasten to say that we pay our own way—I have travelled with him on six occasions. Sometimes there have been difficult speeches to make in places such as Prague and Athens. He has always been a credit to the House when he has spoken.

Much has been said in the past six hours about getting home early. I would not do the hon. Gentleman's cause much good by going on any longer. However, he is a Member who should be considered. Members should reflect on whether he is worth a vote.

8.18 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I shall try not to be too pompous. I am sure that I speak for every Member in congratulating you, Sir Edward, on a marathon sitting. You said at the beginning—I think that your views have been echoed in all parts of the House—that you were less than entirely happy with this form of procedure. I think that I am not being too controversial when I say that most of us who have sat through these proceedings—I have heard every syllable uttered—feel that whoever is Speaker after today would be well advised to ask the appropriate Committee to take an early look at the way in which the Speaker is chosen in future, and perhaps to consider the Canadian system, where the election is conducted entirely by secret ballot, supervised by the Clerks.

It is indeed a great honour merely to be proposed for the office of Speaker, and I am deeply grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) and to my friend, the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), for their generous remarks when proposing me. It is quite something to be thought, even by a few colleagues, to be a worthy successor to Madam Speaker Boothroyd. Whoever succeeds her will have a daunting task, and not just because of her own formidable qualities.

As Madam Speaker Boothroyd said in her valedictory address, there is much to be done to redeem Parliament's reputation and influence. My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk referred to the statement that I issued. It must be the new Speaker's prime purpose to help put Parliament back at the centre of the nation's public life, and the Chamber at the centre of Parliament's. Far too many of those whom we represent do not see Parliament's relevance to their daily lives. Far too many of those who provide them with their information ignore it, and to be honest, far too many of us on both sides of the House seek to exercise our influence through the media, to the neglect of our responsibilities here.

Those are problems that cannot be tackled by the Speaker alone, but the Speaker has a central and pivotal role in tackling them. Scrupulously and rigorously impartial, the Speaker is not in the Chair to make life easy for either Government or Opposition, but rather to give each hon. Member—we are all equal here—a proper opportunity to pursue a question or defend a cause, regardless of party, position or seniority.

Of course, the Speaker cannot dictate the business of the House, but as a Back Bencher who has made three successful applications for emergency debates in my time here, I am well aware that the Speaker can help to ensure that we debate the issues that trouble those who send us here. One of the reasons for Parliament's loss of influence is that we are far too often seen to be discussing the arcane, rather than the urgent. One of the reasons that our institution is under increasing criticism is that we often seem to be too subservient.

I sometimes think that we too rarely recall what has been achieved in the past by individual crusading Members—people such as Eleanor Rathbone, Alan Herbert, Sydney Silverman and my own great parliamentary hero, William Wilberforce. Courageous, innovative, independent-minded Members should always feel that they have an ally in that Chair.

There are, rightly, strict limitations on the power of the Speaker who, at the end of the day, must never go against what the House directs, but I would wish to encourage attendance and spontaneity in every major debate by setting aside a period when hon. Members could genuinely catch the Speaker's eye.

Because I am so concerned at the decline in Parliament's influence, I would wish to establish a standing Speaker's Conference which would include representatives from each party, with a broad agenda to include the relationship of Chamber to Committees and the structure of the parliamentary day and year. In that context, it is clearly important that we recognise that Parliament's hours of sitting have changed many times over the centuries, and that Members of Parliament have personal and family obligations.

Like Madam Speaker Boothroyd, I am very conscious of the Speaker's public role as the voice and representative of the Commons. Only the Speaker can represent this place and all its Members, and remind the courts and other public bodies of the rights and duties of the elected House in a sovereign Parliament.

Whoever wins the approbation of the House today will have a difficult task. It will not be easy, either, for any of the candidates to forsake a gregarious parliamentary life for the relative loneliness of the Chair, although for me at least, the thought of no more Whips makes that prospect bearable.

I know that there are those who see me primarily as a traditionalist. It is true that I love this place, but I see no point in clinging to the trappings of a great legislative

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

assembly if we do not introduce reforms that will bring more effective power back to the Chamber. I have no desire to become the curator of a museum to democracy.

I would, however, like to play a part in a totally and fiercely non-partisan way in injecting new life into that democracy—a democracy that has often been improved and reformed in the past by those who understood its roots and cherished its history. I hope, Sir Edward, that even at this late hour, the House will consider giving me the opportunity to join their number.

Sir Edward Heath: The original Question was, "That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker", since when an amendment has been proposed to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Sir Patrick Cormack".

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 130, Noes 287.

Division No. 308] **[8.25 pm**

AYES

Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Faber, David
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hayes, John
Healey, John
Horam, John
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kidney, David
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Mitchell, Austin
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Salmond, Alex
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Steen, Anthony
Stinchcombe, Paul
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tipping, Paddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Raymond Powell and Mr. Gerald Howarth.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brake, Tom
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Canavan, Dennis
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*

Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

Sir Edward Heath: I call Mr. Martin Bell to move an amendment in favour of Mr. Richard Shepherd.

8.37 pm

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I beg to move, as an amendment to the Question, to leave out "Mr. Michael J. Martin" and insert instead thereof "Mr. Richard Shepherd".

Sir Edward, the hour calls for brevity. Brevity is in my nature, and the cause for which I rise is simply stated. It is to suggest that the name of the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) be inserted as an amendment, by nature of the quality of the man.

What a debate we have had. The speeches have been short and of high quality. The whipping was either non-existent or indiscernible. Would that it were always so. The challenges that the House faces have been widely stated. They include an erosion of its authority, reputation and influence by a more assertive judiciary, a more aggressive press and the burgeoning power of the Executive. If we wish to complain about that, the fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves. It is up to us. We can make a difference because in the end we do not represent parties; we represent people, every one of us. I think that this is a time when we can make a difference. I cannot imagine a more important debate and series of votes than those taking place tonight.

I honestly believe that we have an opportunity. I mention the name of the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills because he is the right man for this time. He is widely respected on both sides of the House. His proposer and seconder come from different sides of the House. For 18 years he has been a tireless champion of many causes of liberty and libertarian causes, such as freedom of information. The fight now is for the freedom of the people and of the House, which now has to be campaigned for as much as ever.

I shall mention something that Wentworth said in 1575, when he criticised the subservience of the House to the power of the Executive, which was then the royal family. He said:

> There is nothing so necessary for the preservation of the prince and state as free speech, and without it it is a scorn and mockery to call it a Parliament house, for in truth it is none but a very school of flattery and dissimulation.

[Mr. Martin Bell]

For that, the Queen had him locked up in the Tower of London the next day.

The cause is less conspicuous now, but the need is as urgent as it ever was to restore the dignity and reputation of the House. I believe that there is a man who, as Speaker, would be eminently well qualified to do the job. That man is the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills and I commend his name to the House.

8.40 pm

Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): It gives me great pleasure to second the nomination of the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). If I may breach a parliamentary convention, I shall call him my hon. Friend, because we have campaigned together on causes that should engage everyone in the House. He is concerned about the rights of citizens, and he campaigns against official secrecy, to protect whistleblowers, and for the freedom of information.

I remember above all an occasion in the last Parliament when Sir Richard Scott had delivered his devastating report, alleging that Ministers had behaved as they should not have behaved. That produced a motion of censure in the House. It was a difficult moment because it required hon. Members to choose between Parliament, accountability, sovereignty—all those fine words that we use—and the pressures of party, Whips and discipline. On that day, two hon. Members in the Government party voted for Parliament, and one of them was the person whom I am seconding. He does not just talk about the rights of Parliament; he protects those rights and asserts them when it matters.

If one theme has been constant throughout the contributions, including those by all the candidates, it is that something is wrong with the House of Commons that must be put right. The question before the House is: how determined is it to put that right?

I commend my hon. Friend to the House because I believe that the moment has arrived for a shock to the system. Whatever else my hon. Friend would be, he would be a shock to the system. Either hon. Members believe that we have reached a point when a shock is required, or they believe that business as usual will do. That is the choice. This institution has arrived at that moment. It is no good saying that it will be the job of some future Speaker whom we may elect to put matters right. The job of putting them right rests with all of us in the House now. It is no good talking afterwards about the glories of Parliament and the need for reform, unless we are prepared now to administer the shock to the system that may produce that change.

I know that the person whom I am recommending is said to be an outsider. My goodness, he is. He is as far away from the usual channels as it is possible to get, and that is why I recommend him to hon. Members.

Sir Edward Heath: Mr. Richard Shepherd has been proposed and seconded. I now invite him to submit himself to the House if he so wishes.

8.44 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): In a sense, I am the least qualified of all the candidates who have stood in front of hon. Members today. In fact, my disqualifications fill a long sheet. I am one of the few Conservative Members to have lost the Whip. I have tried to vote against my party when I thought that it was wrong. It is claimed that I am emotional, and it is true that in Parliament I am emotional. I am emotional because I profoundly believe in the purpose of the House, and I think that that view is shared by many people. I hope that in that emotionalism I have used argument, reason, principle and conscience. Those are things that I think unite many Members.

In a sense, the House is experiencing a crisis. With the redevelopment of our constitution, we are in a remarkable state—a state in which the House of Lords, no less, is more vital and more vibrant, and checks authority and the executive power more meaningfully than is done here. How can it be that we, the elected representatives of the people, no longer effectively challenge Government? That is what we are asking people to reflect on.

I sense a great discontent among ourselves, on both sides of the House. We do not discuss measures that are timely, or matters that are important. We had only one Standing Order No. 24 emergency debate during the eight years in which the previous Speaker was Speaker. How can we be timely? How can we reflect the needs of those who sent us here?

I am mindful that I can stand in this House on equal terms with anyone—with a head of Government, with a Minister—because I, like such people, have been elected by an individual constituency. We should never forget that that is the first trust that sends us here.

To whom do we owe our allegiance? My party is very vigorous in trying to get rid of people, and a long time ago when it was trying to get rid of Winston Churchill, he was asked to whom he owed his allegiance. He said first to his country, then to his constituency, and thirdly to his party.

When party becomes so aggressive that it consumes our conscience—when we no longer discuss the politics that are the laws that form the way in which we live; when we accept that the House of Lords will now be dealing with legislation and the points that we raise with regard to that legislation, and that ultimately the Executive will deal not with us, the elected representatives, but with the appointees who now sit at the other end of this Parliament—there is a crisis, in a sense. We ought to assert and affirm that our first intent is to represent those who sent us here.

I have seen Members on both sides of the House in both Lobbies—I have been through more than one Lobby on occasions such as this—whose tears have flowed, and whose conscience has been sensitive; yet they have voted against issues that they have stood for during their parliamentary careers.

The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) said that he was leaving this place to take up politics. Most of us came here because we believed in politics. We believed that this was the fulcrum where we could dispose of the business of our country. If I am given the honour

of representing this House, I want to ensure that each one of us—wherever we come from, and whomever we represent—is able to do just that.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 136, Noes 282.

Division No. 309] **[8.48 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cash, William
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Collins, Tim
Cooper, Yvette
Cotter, Brian
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Faber, David
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Flynn, Paul
Fraser, Christopher
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hayes, John
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Maples, John
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Mitchell, Austin
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Mullin, Chris
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Randall, John
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Salmond, Alex
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thompson, William
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir Teddy Taylor and
Mr. Eric Forth.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*

Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Snape and
Ann Keen.

Question accordingly negatived.

Sir Edward Heath: I understand that two of the tellers from earlier this evening wish to make a report to me.

Mr. Snape: Sir Edward, we have to report that in the Division on the amendment to insert "Dr. David Clark", the numbers reported in the No Lobby should have been 257 and not 296.

Sir Edward Heath: I will ensure that the outcome of the Division is accurately recorded in Votes and Proceedings. I understand that it makes no difference to the overall result.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On a point of order, Sir Edward. More than six hours ago, I raised a point of order to establish what would happen if all the motions were negatived, including the main motion. I am concerned that the House is about to apply to the merits of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn (Mr. Martin) a different test from the one that it has just applied to all the other candidates for whom we have voted.

I believe that it is important, perhaps most of all for the sake of the authority of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Springburn, that the House should understand that the judgment that it is about to make on his merits or otherwise as Speaker should be exactly the same as the judgment made on all the other candidates. The House ought to have an opportunity to divide, if it wishes—as I wish it to do—in exactly the same way as it has on all the other candidates. If the motion is then negatived, we should have an opportunity to adjourn, to return to the proposal made by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), or to see whether there is some different way of electing a Speaker.

Question put: That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 370, Noes 8.

Division No. 310] **[9.7 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*

Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cash, William
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Haselhurst, Rt Hon Sir Alan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leigh, Edward
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sayeed, Jonathan
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*

Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Snape and
Ann Keen.

NOES

Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Viggers, Peter
Wilshire, David

Tellers for the Noes:
Dr. Julian Lewis and
Mr. David Maclean.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That Mr. Michael J. Martin do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

Whereupon SIR EDWARD HEATH *left the Chair, and* MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *was taken out of his place and conducted to the Chair by* MR. PETER SNAPE *and* ANN KEEN. *[Applause.]*

9.20 pm

Mr. Speaker-Elect *(standing on the upper step):* Order. I understand that the Speaker-Elect normally makes some formal remarks before taking the throne. It has been a long day and I do not want to keep hon. Members, but the House owes a debt of gratitude to the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), the Father of the House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I hope that the House will allow me to say that my thoughts are with my wife Mary, my son Paul, my daughter Mary and my grandson Ryan. Family is important to me and I will endeavour to see that families are included in the proceedings of the House. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Before I assume the Chair as Speaker-Elect, I thank the House once again for its confidence in me. I pray that I shall prove worthy of that confidence and that all of us will maintain the high tradition of this place. I also ask hon. Members for their prayers.

9.21 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): It is my pleasure to be the first Member of Parliament to offer you congratulations on your election, Mr. Speaker-Elect. Much has been made of your origins in hardship and difficulty, and your upbringing in Scotland in poverty which, no doubt, will give you a special insight into the position of many people. However, I want to lay stress not on your origins but on your qualities, integrity and worldly wisdom.

A moment or two ago, Mr. Speaker-Elect, you said that no Labour leader had ever offered you a Government or Front-Bench job. On behalf of this Labour leader, may I say that I realise what a great oversight that was? I know that you feel a sense of joy and pride for your constituents in Glasgow, Springburn. Back in the 1980s, when you and I sat on Committees together, you told me what a tough training ground in politics Glasgow was, especially for speeches. When you made a good speech in Glasgow, people did not applaud—they just let you live.

You follow a long line of people who have recently fulfilled the office with great distinction, not least Betty Boothroyd, who was a superb Speaker and enjoyed a fantastic reputation in the House and the whole country. You know—as we all do—that that will be a hard act to follow. You are the 156th occupant of the Chair. As we have just seen, the House follows the tradition that people become Speaker only with great reluctance. That is not surprising, given that a number of your predecessors died in battle or were beheaded. However, the post has possible advantages, as I believe that one Speaker was canonised.

On behalf of the House, may I offer my congratulations to the other Members who were candidates in the election for Speaker? I listened to their outstanding speeches. It is a tribute to the strength of the House that there were so many able and fitting candidates from both sides. Of course, I pay tribute to the Father of the House who did as we expected and handled our proceedings with great tact, skill and efficiency.

Today, there are enormous pressures on Speakers. In years gone by, Mr. Speaker-Elect, your predecessors had their words and judgments recorded in *Hansard*. However, since our proceedings have begun to be broadcast, Speakers have become familiar figures, nationally and, indeed, internationally. I know that your predecessor received regular correspondence from the United States, from people who were avid watchers of Prime Minister's Question Time—there is no accounting for taste. You can take comfort from the fact that, although such letters are frequently critical of the two main combatants, they are unfailingly complimentary about the Speaker and, no doubt, will continue to be so.

The context of your job, Mr. Speaker-Elect, is changing; not just because of the 24-hour scrutiny by the media, but because of our new devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I hope the House will forgive me if I say that this is the first time that the House has met since the tragic death of our colleague and friend Donald Dewar. It is right that we acknowledge not just the tremendous contribution that he made to the new Parliament in Scotland, but the contribution that he made here in this House for 26 years. He was a parliamentarian of extraordinary distinction and he was one of your fellow Members of Parliament in Glasgow. He will be sorely missed.

Your election today is the clearest reflection of the respect that this House has for you. It is based on your genuine popularity, the affection that is felt in all parts of the Commons, and on your inherent sense of fairness. During your time as Deputy Speaker—a post you filled with distinction—you have occupied the Chair with good humour and a style of gentle persuasion that has been a most effective way of exercising your authority.

I can say also with some confidence that, some time during the first 18 months of your occupancy of the Chair—I am not sure when—we shall have a newly elected House of Commons, and there will be some new faces for you to identify; although, I hope, not too many.

Today has been an extremely important day both for the House of Commons and for our democracy. We do not elect a new Speaker very often. The job, for all its hazards, has historically rather more job security than either that of Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition. It is a job which traditionally people have filled until the day comes when they decide that they want to retire.

This House has shown its great confidence in you, in that, from an unprecedentedly wide range of candidates, you have been chosen to occupy the highest office that this House, by election, can bestow. I offer you again my warmest congratulations and every good wish for the future.

9.27 pm

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): I, too, wish to offer you my congratulations on your election and your great achievement today, Mr. Speaker-Elect. No matter how many right hon. and hon. Members voted for you or against you, you are now Speaker of the whole House of Commons.

I, too, should like to echo the words of thanks of the Prime Minister to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), as Father of the House, for the unflappable—not to say completely immovable—way in which he has conducted proceedings today.

Nevertheless, the large number of candidates on this occasion has raised a legitimate question about the procedures used for this purpose; a question that I believe that the House should consider during your speakership. Fears were expressed that the procedures today would be a shambles. I do not think that they have been a shambles—although it will not always be the case that the losing of 39 votes is completely irrelevant to the outcome—but the system used may not have been ideal.

Having listened to every speech made in the debate today, I believe, along with the Prime Minister, that the House of Commons can be proud of the diversity, abilities and integrity of all of the candidates who have participated today, and none of them should regret having done so.

Your position is far more than ceremonial, Mr. Speaker-Elect, as you know. The Speaker is at the same time the servant and the master of the House. You are now the custodian of our rules, our privileges and our traditions. You will need to use your keen sense of the House and to be able to judge the occasion. You must discard, as you well know, your former affiliations and become the independent champion of the rights of Back Benchers and of all parties in the House.

We are all well aware of the concern that has been expressed today by most of the candidates, their proposers and seconders that the Commons is no longer the place that it was. Many of us will look to you, as Speaker, to follow the example set by your predecessor in resisting all attempts to bypass, marginalise or downgrade the House of Commons. We look to you robustly to defend the position of the House of Commons at the centre of our national life as the independent democratic forum of the British nation.

I have long experience of your chairmanship in Committee, Mr. Speaker-Elect. Indeed, when I was a junior Minister, I debated a Bill for many months with the late Donald Dewar, who was a charming, thorough and utterly forensic opponent. Your experience of such chairmanship is immense. I recall that it was characterised by fairness, generosity, patience and calm. You will now need those qualities in abundance. Your qualities of patience and calmness will be sorely tested, but the challenge of maintaining them in the face of every provocation is now before you. The challenge of championing the rights of the House of Commons when they are so often under threat is now before you. The challenge of maintaining the impartial conduct of our proceedings is now before you. As you rise to those challenges, Mr. Speaker-Elect, we wish you very well.

9.30 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): May I entirely associate my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Liberal Democrat party with the sincere and warm expression of congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker-Elect, on this historic night for you and, as you said, for your family? In particular, I associate those remarks with my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). Following this election, they will respect you and your integrity as I know, from the reactions to the proposers and seconders, the House respects each of them. I pay great tribute to both of them, too.

I also associate myself entirely with the tributes paid to the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). At one point in the first half hour of the election, as the points of order flowed on, I thought that he might break the deadlock by offering himself as a compromise candidate. He chose not to do so.

As has been acknowledged, for many of us in the House—not least for a Glaswegian like yourself, Mr. Speaker-Elect—the last few days have been a tale of two cities. So many of us last week paid tribute to a Scot and a Glaswegian—through and through, like you—who had assumed one of the great offices in the land. Now he is gone. This week, here is another Glaswegian who has assumed one of the great offices in the land. It is a reflective and ironic moment for many of us, not least yourself.

To say something personal, if I may indulge in one thought further, the first time that our new Speaker and I met was on the opposite sides of a picket line at Lochaber high school in Fort William when I was about 15 years old. The cleaners at the school had gone on strike and the NUPE regional representative had come to pay a state visit. We were on opposite sides of the picket line for a most curious reason. The school was closed because the cleaners were on strike and those of us who were pupils were delighted and were supporting them from the other side of the picket line. It is a happy memory.

The debate on the election of a new Speaker has been fascinating, with so many good speeches and so many worthy candidates. You have a full in-tray, Mr. Speaker-Elect, with suggestions for change, modernisation and progress in our proceedings and procedures. All of us who know you know that you will take that seriously.

Finally, I enter one specific plea, which you would expect from the Liberal Democrat Benches. I mentioned Donald Dewar and what he set up and then presided over in Edinburgh. He recognised the multi-faith, multi-faceted

[Mr. Charles Kennedy]

nature of politics in our country. It is important that in its practices and procedures this Chamber recognises that too. We wish you well; all good luck.

9.34 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): On behalf of my colleagues in the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru, I warmly congratulate you, Mr. Speaker-Elect, on your elevation. As I recall, our parliamentary paths first crossed when you reported me to the House for appearing in an education Committee that you were chairing. Unfortunately, the Committee of Selection had by some oversight omitted to make me a member of that Committee. You came to the House to ask for powers to deal with me—powers which, as Chairman of the Committee, you did not have. In your current, or soon-to-be-occupied, position, you will have such powers, so I might be more careful about which Committees I gatecrash in future. I am sure that you will use your powers wisely.

Like many of us, Mr. Speaker-Elect, you will have noted the seven hours that it has taken the House to reach such a decisive and successful conclusion. Perhaps you will look north and recall that, when only one day old, the Scottish Parliament, presided over in distinguished fashion by Donald Dewar, managed to elect its Presiding Officer in only half an hour. I am sure that the desirable outcome that we have achieved today would not have been different had we used different procedures, but I suspect that there is a more efficient system available. Perhaps a new legislature—the Scottish Parliament, in which your son serves—might hold some lessons that would inform the proceedings of this House.

I take issue with one comment you made when offering yourself to the House, Mr. Speaker-Elect. You said that your background should not be a reason for voting for you, or for voting against you, but I happen to think that your background is a substantial reason for electing you to the Chair that you now occupy. All your achievements in life, including the high office that you are now to hold, have been the result of your own efforts and those of your colleagues. I am sure that your background and the wisdom that you have gathered in your struggles through life will stand you in excellent stead to be a most distinguished occupant of the Chair.

9.36 pm

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden): At the risk of testing the patience of the House by addressing it twice in one day, Mr. Speaker-Elect, I should like to offer you my personal congratulations on your election as Speaker. Having had the pleasure of working with you for the past three and a half years, I wish you well. I am sure that you will conduct your office in a most distinguished manner.

On the last occasion that a Speaker was chosen, there was one defeated candidate who felt, out of courtesy, that he should speak. On this occasion, you and the House will be aware that there are rather a lot of defeated candidates, but I think that I can say—at least on behalf of the many on this side of the House—that we shall not test the House's patience by contributing individually. Therefore, on behalf of my colleagues who have fallen before you in the course of today's proceedings, I salute your success and wish you well. You will have the support of the House and we trust that yours will be a happy and successful tenure in the office of Speaker.

9.37 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Mr. Speaker-Elect, today's events have worldwide significance: it has been announced on the nine o'clock news that Libya, China, North Korea and Iraq have adopted the system that we adopted today for the election of their leaders. I have no doubt that that is, in part, the result of the influence of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). Although, sadly, I failed to persuade him today, I believe that one good feature has emerged.

Every single speech by a candidate dealt with the same theme: the importance of the House of Commons. If every school studying citizenship received a copy of today's *Hansard*, students would have a better education in the way in which we perceive our work. Every speech made has been outstanding. I feel sure that, having gone through the problems associated with the selection, you, Mr. Speaker-Elect, will feel strengthened in reinforcing the power of the House in the months and years that lie ahead.

9.39 pm

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): Mr. Speaker-Elect, as no party leader now speaks for me, I should like to add my words of congratulation to you on your election. It is a great honour for you personally, a great honour for Mary and your family, a great honour for your native city of Glasgow and a great honour for Scotland. Much has been said about the great responsibilities and onerous duties to the House that accompany your new position. I hope that you will work hard to protect the rights of Members of Parliament and to ensure that the Government are accountable to Parliament.

This may be my last opportunity to address this Parliament. You, Mr. Speaker-Elect, will be the fifth Speaker during my time in the House. When I was first elected in October 1974, Selwyn Lloyd was Speaker. Harold Wilson was Prime Minister, and I was a quarter of his majority. Gradually, through the loss of by-elections, that majority was eroded and eventually there was no majority. That Government were defeated on the Floor of the House by a vote.

That scenario is most unlikely to repeat itself during the lifetime of this Parliament because of the size of the Government's majority. However, a Government who have a majority that is perhaps too large are not necessarily a good thing for democracy. Sometimes Governments with very large majorities behave arrogantly and treat Parliament as a mere rubber stamp. I hope that you, Mr. Speaker-Elect, will not allow that to happen. Parliament will not do its job unless Members are considered first and foremost as representatives of people rather than mere puppets of any party.

Members have a right and a duty to tell their party and their Government when they have it wrong. Should it be thought that this is becoming rather too political, I remind the House that I am only one of three Members of this Parliament who is not a member of any political party. I am unique in the Scottish Parliament in that I am the only Member who is not a member of any party. That is

because last year I was given a free transfer from what used to be called the people's party. That was not exactly of my own volition.

I hope, Mr. Speaker-Elect, that you will ensure that Members of all parties and of none will have the opportunity to speak up for the people whom they represent. I place on record my thanks to all Members past and present whom I have had the pleasure of knowing and working with over the past 26 years. I have had the privilege of representing my constituents for more than a quarter of a century in this place, and I hope that I will have the privilege of continuing to represent them for many years in the Scottish Parliament.

9.42 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Here, there are 659 Members of many faiths and of none, and of many Christian denominations. I happen for the time being to be chair of the Christian fellowship. Your election, Mr. Speaker-Elect, is more momentous in one more respect than those that have been mentioned. I think that, for the first time since the Reformation, a Roman Catholic has been elected to chair the House. On behalf of other Christian denominations and of all other Members from different faith backgrounds, we welcome that. Another old tradition has been broken. We are now much more a representative House, where the highest offices can go to Members whatever their faith background, than we were before you were elected.

9.43 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I congratulate you on your successful election, Mr. Speaker-Elect. I say as chair of the all-party group on childcare that it has been gratifying to hear many Members on both sides of the House entering the election and saying that child care and family friendly policies can be part of the workings of the House. You said, Mr. Speaker-Elect, that you have met many members of the staff who have families to go to but who stay with us until the early hours of the morning. Scrutiny is part of Parliament's work, but so is a modern Parliament for modern families. It is great that that has been acknowledged by candidates from all parties.

The Prime Minister: I have to signify that it is Her Majesty's pleasure that this House should present their Speaker on this day at 11.15 pm in the House of Peers for Her Majesty's royal approbation.

9.44 pm

Sitting suspended.

11.18 pm

On resuming—

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners.

The House went; and having returned:

Mr. Speaker: I have a script to read.

I have to report to the House that this House has been to the House of Peers, where Her Majesty has been graciously pleased to signify by her Lords Commissioners her approbation of the choice of myself as Speaker to this House.

My first duty in the House is to repeat my respectful acknowledgements of and my grateful thanks for the great honour it has done me and the confidence that it has conferred on me, and to renew the assurance of my entire devotion to the service of the House.

BETTY BOOTHROYD

Resolved,

That an humble address be presented to Her Majesty praying Her Majesty that she will be most graciously pleased to confer some signal mark of her royal favour upon the right hon. Betty Boothroyd, for her eminent services during the important period in which she has, with such distinguished ability and dignity, presided in the Chair of the House and assuring Her Majesty that whatever expense Her Majesty shall think fit to be incurred upon that account this House will make good the same—[*Mrs. Beckett.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved,

That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mrs. Beckett.*]

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-five minutes to Twelve o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 24 October 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

MESSAGE FROM THE QUEEN

SPEAKER BOOTHROYD'S RETIREMENT

Mr. Graham Allen (Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Household): I have to inform the House, on behalf of the Prime Minister, that the Address of 24 October 2000 to Her Majesty, praying Her Majesty that she will be most graciously pleased to confer some signal mark of Her royal favour upon the right hon. Betty Boothroyd for her eminent services during the important period in which she has, with such distinguished ability and dignity, presided in the Chair of this House, and assuring Her Majesty that this House will make good the expenses attending the same, has been presented to Her Majesty, and Her Majesty has been pleased to receive the same very graciously, and has commanded me to acquaint this House that Her Majesty is desirous, in compliance with the request of Her faithful Commons, to confer upon the right hon. Betty Boothroyd some signal mark of Her royal favour.

DEATHS OF MEMBERS

Mr. Speaker: I regret to have to report to the House the deaths of Audrey Wise, Member for Preston, and of the right hon. Donald Dewar, Member for Glasgow, Anniesland. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will join me in mourning the loss of two colleagues and extending our sympathies to the right hon. and hon. Members' families and friends.

WRIT ISSUED DURING THE ADJOURNMENT

MR. SPEAKER acquainted the House that Madam Speaker had issued, during the Adjournment, a warrant for a new writ for the county constituency of South Antrim in the room of Mr. Clifford Forsythe, deceased.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Private Finance Initiative

1. **Sandra Gidley** (Romsey): What studies his Department has commissioned, undertaken or reviewed concerning the use of private finance within the NHS. [131847]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): It is a very real pleasure, Mr. Speaker, to be the first Minister able to welcome you to your new official responsibilities. I am sure that you will discharge your responsibilities with your customary fairness and good humour—qualities which, even during Health questions, I hope will not be too sorely tested.

The greater use of private finance is helping to modernise the national health service, especially through the private finance initiative. The PFI can be given the go-ahead only when it demonstrates better value for money in comparison with the publicly funded alternative and provides improved facilities for the NHS. NHS trusts are required to monitor performance throughout the lifetime of the PFI contract.

Sandra Gidley: May I also be among the first to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker? I hope that your choice of clothing is an indication of a more modern approach to come. It is strange to be here; this is my first question.

Will the Secretary of State concede that the recent King's Fund report is the latest in a series of reports to suggest that local health needs, particularly bed capacity in PFI projects, are not being consistently met? Will he go further than reviewing individual projects, as promised by Ministers in another place? Will he undertake to review publicly all PFI hospital projects?

Mr. Milburn: I welcome the hon. Lady to her first Health Question Time. I am sorry that I will have to disappoint her by saying no, that will not be possible. The truth is that the PFI is providing much needed new hospitals in many parts of the country, sometimes in communities that have long campaigned for them. It is an efficient means of procuring new hospitals. Indeed, owing to the time and cost overruns associated with the old method, which tended to procure through Exchequer capital, the taxpayer ended up footing the bill for six hospitals and receiving only five in return. I do not know about Liberal Democrat economics, but that does not seem to make sense to me.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): I, too, congratulate you, Mr. Speaker.

Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State give an assurance that the private finance initiative will not threaten UK ambulance services? Will he consider establishing an inspection service for ambulance services, like those for police and fire authorities, so that we can be sure that the funding and performance of UK ambulance services are monitored and that there is an equitable service throughout the UK?

Mr. Milburn: I assure my hon. Friend that we already monitor the performance of individual ambulance service trusts; it is important that we do so. I can further assure her that, in future, we intend to move away from the PFI approach based purely on the procurement of an individual institution such as a new hospital. As she is aware, when we establish a new hospital in a community, it has implications for primary, community and social services, as well as for ambulance services. The NHS plan

published in July sets out a new approach to procurement, whereby private finance will be extended into such areas and out of the purely acute sectors of the NHS.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): May I add my congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker, and, at the risk of embarrassing you, say as a Catholic that it is remarkable that we have our first Catholic Speaker?

Will the Secretary of State tell his officials to rule out private finance initiatives that involve substantial cuts being made to the number of acute beds in East Kent? I draw the right hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that, even at the height of summer, there were patients on trolleys in offices and corridors in the Kent and Canterbury hospital and its two sister hospitals?

Mr. Milburn: There are problems in Kent and we keep the situation under review, but, in all candour, I have to say that many of the problems of pressure on parts of the NHS and of backlogs in repair, maintenance and new developments have not arisen suddenly and recently, but are the consequence of decades of under-investment in the NHS.

Rather than judging the Opposition on their rhetoric on such matters, we should judge them on their record. We know that, in their final year in office, revenue expenditure on the NHS fell in real terms. In addition, when the Conservative Government left office at the end of their last full Parliament, capital expenditure on the NHS was less than it had been at the beginning of that Parliament. The Conservatives have a record as long as your arm, Mr. Speaker—no wonder the Leader of the Opposition drinks to forget.

I can provide other facts and compare the Conservatives' record with ours. Capital spending has risen from £1.6 billion a year when we entered office to £2.8 billion a year this year; the biggest hospital building programme this country has ever seen is under way; and two new hospitals have already opened, with another to follow this year, seven more next year and nine the year after. There is a straightforward choice before the country: more investment in health with Labour, or less with the Conservatives.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I, too, congratulate you, Mr. Speaker.

I welcome the new capital investment of £700,000 in the accident and emergency department of the James Paget hospital in my constituency, and the £2 million capital investment allocated for new renal, eye and skin services at that hospital. None the less, after the neglect of so many years, there is more to be done, so may I ask my right hon. Friend what additional capital investment can hospitals such as the James Paget hospital expect?

Mr. Milburn: We shall make announcements in due course on further capital and revenue allocations to health authorities. As my hon. Friend is aware, the extra investment we are now making provides the foundation for a real expansion of NHS services. Under the NHS plan, during the course of this decade, we expect to build 100 new hospitals and to modernise every accident and emergency department that needs it. In the next few years, there will be 250 new scanners and more beds, nurses and doctors in the system. We have achieved a lot, but we are the first to acknowledge that there is a lot more to do. We have a long way to go if we are to rectify the decades of under-investment over which Conservative Governments presided.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Mr. Speaker, as one whose first name is Martin, I congratulate you on your new office and assure you of my good wishes and those of my colleagues.

I acknowledge that we in Northern Ireland have in some ways benefited from the private finance initiative, but we want people to be empowered. Will the Department of Health consider the possibility of enabling purchasers of groceries and other products who do not want air miles to receive instead medical miles, which could allow more money to go into the health service, perhaps for their own treatment?

Mr. Milburn: That is what we want and it is happening, not only in England, but throughout the United Kingdom. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there is more money than ever before going into the NHS. Of course, that will not solve every money problem and there will continue to be pressures in the NHS—there will be pressures this winter and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. However, there is a good reason for that: the problem facing the NHS today is no longer purely one of a shortage of cash; it is a problem of capacity. When we have not enough trained doctors and nurses, it is self-evident that it will take time to put that right. The question is, who is best placed to deal with those capacity problems? Are they best dealt with by a party that is committed to growth in the national health service, or by a party that is committed to cutback and closure in the NHS?

Cancer Research

2. **Ms Linda Perham** (Ilford, North): What funding he is committing over the next three years to research into the cancers specific to men. [131848]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): Congratulations, Mr. Speaker.

The most common male cancer is prostate cancer, which kills about 8,500 men each year. The Government are concerned to cut deaths from prostate cancer, which is why we are increasing the Department's directly commissioned research into it by an extra £1 million each year over the next three years, to bring it up to £4.2 million.

Ms Perham: I welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker. I also welcome the Minister's boost for prostate cancer funds. Will she join me in applauding the achievement of my constituent Colin Osborne, whose Orchid appeal in respect of male cancers has raised £6 million in three years? Will she also recognise the work of the men's health forum, which is also campaigning for increased resources for male cancers? Does she agree, however, that there is much more to be done to increase awareness of male cancers, and of men's health issues in general?

Yvette Cooper: I certainly congratulate my hon. Friend's constituent on his work in raising awareness of

male cancers, but I also congratulate her on her own work in raising awareness, and raising funds for future research as well.

We agree that there is more to be done. Under the last Government, only £98,000 was spent by the Department of Health on research into prostate cancer in 1996–97. That is why it is so important for us to work with other funders, with the charities and with the Medical Research Council to increase investment in prostate cancer research.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): May I be—possibly—the last to congratulate you on your post, Mr. Speaker, and, perhaps appropriately, wish you the health to enjoy your time in office?

I wonder whether the Minister agrees with the Government's cancer tsar, who was quoted in *Nursing Times* as saying that

he would never consider having a prostate cancer test himself because treatment was likely to do more harm than the disease itself.

On the day that the Government announced £1 million for prostate cancer research, they gave an extra £47 million to the dome. What message does the Minister think that sends about the Government's sense of priorities?

Yvette Cooper: We believe that it is up to individual men to make their own choices about whether to have a prostate-specific antigen test. That is why we are developing an informed-choice programme, to provide men with all the information that they need to make their own decisions about whether to have the test.

As for cancer research funding, the hon. Gentleman's party's record is appalling. By 2003, spending on cancer research directly commissioned by the Department of Health and the Medical Research Council will be £73 million. In 1995–96, it was just £25 million. We have said that we will increase investment in cancer by £500 million. The hon. Gentleman has said that he will increase the subsidy to private health insurance by £500 million. Which does he think is the priority of the British people?

Nurses (Kidderminster)

3. **Mr. Christopher Gill** (Ludlow): How many nurses previously employed at Kidderminster district general hospital have accepted alternative employment within the NHS in the last two years. [131849]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I add my congratulations, Mr. Speaker.

Neither the Department of Health nor the national health service collects firm details of the future employment intentions of staff. However, Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS trust reports that from 1 October 1998 to 30 September 2000 its records indicate that 41 qualified nurses previously employed at Kidderminster general hospital accepted alternative employment in the NHS in Worcestershire.

Mr. Gill: I must say that I am rather disappointed by that reply. I am sure that the Minister will be as concerned as I was to learn that the chairman of Worcester Acute Hospitals NHS trust has said, "We must attract more nurses and retain them."

When new Labour was in opposition, it lost no opportunity to criticise the Conservative Government in terms of the national health service. Now, however, the Prime Minister says that the Government failed to estimate accurately the scale of the problems of the NHS. That is the reason why there are not enough doctors, nurses and dentists—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is making a speech.

Mr. Gill *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will not get away with making a speech. He had an opportunity to put a question, and that is the end of it. Does the Minister wish to reply?

Ms Stuart: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) will be delighted to learn that Kidderminster hospital has a full complement of nursing staff. In addition, unlike the previous Government, who cut nursing training places consistently—between 1992 and 1994, the number went down to some 13,000—we have not just increased nursing training places but we have brought back some 5,000 nurses. Furthermore, unlike the Tory Front-Bench health team, we regard women, who form a large part of the nurses who return, as being 100 per cent. members of the work force, not as being worth only 80 per cent.

Single Currency

4. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What administrative impact the national changeover plan has had on NHS trusts. [131850]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): As set out in the second outline national changeover plan published in March, the NHS has carried out a measure of pre-planning for the possibility of UK entry into the single currency. This was carried out by existing staff from within current running cost budgets. Resources have not been diverted from patient care.

Dr. Lewis: Is not that an extraordinary answer, when it has been estimated that the cost to the NHS of the national changeover plan will total between £75 million and £95 million? That is four times the cost of the new community hospital that is being built to service New Forest. How does the Minister feel about sacrificing four community hospitals to the Government's obsession with the single European currency?

Mr. Denham: Those Opposition Members who are so fanatically opposed to anything European that they are even further to the right than those on the Opposition Front Bench are in the habit of quoting wild figures, exaggerations and unfounded claims about this matter, like many others.

I quote from the press statement put out by Buckinghamshire health authority on 9 October this year. It states:

> The amount of time and money taken up by this exercise so far is a few days in each trust and would equate to a cost of several hundred pounds, rather than the hundreds of thousands of pounds previously quoted in the press.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I wish you all the best, Mr. Speaker, in your new role.

Despite efforts by the NHS executive to stifle our inquiry into the changeover costs by health authority, we have obtained figures. One of the examples is Buckinghamshire health authority—I am glad that that example has been cited. The changeover plan will cost Buckinghamshire health authority £500,000 and 13,000 staff-days. Does the Minister support that use of public money which could otherwise be used for patient care?

Mr. Denham: It is outrageous for the Opposition to suggest that such figures have been diverted from patient care, when, as I made clear by quoting from the statement issued by Buckinghamshire health authority, that is not the case. That health authority refers to costs of several hundreds of pounds, not the £433,000 previously quoted in the press. The Opposition should not peddle figures that are simply not true. I am one of those who, unlike the Opposition, believe that at the right time the British people should have the choice as to whether we join the euro, and it is obviously right that a modest amount of sensible planning to anticipate what a change would involve should be undertaken.

Occupational Therapists

5. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): What steps are being taken to recruit more occupational therapists for the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [131851]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): Qualified occupational therapists increased by 1,000 between September 1997 and September 1999. The NHS plan will see a further 6,500 more therapists and other health professionals by 2004. The Department's recruitment and retention strategy includes introducing more flexible and family-friendly employment conditions, increasing training commissions, attracting former staff back to the NHS, and encouraging flexible retirement.

Helen Jones: I add my congratulations to those that you have already received, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister's reply was encouraging, but does he agree that developing new ways of working is vital if we are to recruit and retain more occupational therapists in the NHS, especially as many are women with families? What is he doing to promote that? Will he join me in congratulating Warrington hospital, Warrington Community NHS trust and our local primary care groups, which have recently agreed to review together all their therapy and rehabilitation services, not only to deliver a better service to the patient but to make better use of the skills of the staff? Is not that the way in which we should progress?

Mr. Hutton: I agree strongly with my hon. Friend. She and the House will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently announced a major new investment to ensure that, in future, the NHS provides effective child-care facilities for NHS staff. That would be a major contribution to ensuring that we attract large numbers of extra therapists into the NHS. My hon. Friend will know from discussions with her health authority and her trust the strong and important role that occupational therapists will play in ensuring that the new £900 million investment in intermediate care services, especially for older people, constitutes effective intervention and effective investment.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): While I welcome the Government's commitment to recruiting more occupational therapists, especially in view of the current 20 per cent. shortfall, what steps will they take to ensure that they do not lose occupational therapists? There is a particular problem with pay, which lags behind even that for other NHS professionals. Will the Government take steps on that, on in-service training, which is underfunded in comparison with other NHS profession, and on career development? Occupational therapists do not have the same opportunities as doctors, nurses and other health professionals to move into management in the health service or in social services.

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful for the qualified support that the hon. Gentleman expressed for what we are trying to do. He is right to say that we need to provide a more attractive career structure for occupational therapists and other NHS professionals. That is why, for example, consultant therapists will work in the NHS in future. That constitutes an extra career grade and is an important development.

However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman acknowledges that we must be realistic about the matter. We have an ambitious plan to increase the number of therapists in the NHS. I am not sure about the vacancy rate to which he referred; I think that the information is from the College of Occupational Therapists. I am not sure about the data on which it was based. As my right hon. Friend said, recruitment problems relate to the growing capacity of the NHS. Trusts and hospitals around the country are actively trying to recruit more occupational therapists and other members of professions allied to medicine. The problem is associated with the growth of the NHS, but we will get there, and address the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Congratulations, Mr. Speaker.

Earlier this year, I attended an open day at Plymouth Derriford hospital for young school students from Plymouth, Devon and Cornwall to see the good work that occupational therapists do. Will the Minister join me in congratulating the occupational therapists on that initiative? What message does he have for young people who are currently considering entering the profession?

Mr. Hutton: That is a tricky one. I support my hon. Friend's comments and her actions in her constituency to support the expansion in the NHS. I would tell young people in her constituency and everywhere else that the future of the NHS is optimistic and positive as long as Labour is in government. I could not say the same if there was a change of Government, given the Conservative

party's record and the legacy that we inherited from it. Under us, the NHS has a positive future; under the Conservatives, it does not.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): May I also congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your elevation?

The Minister should not only consider the recruitment of occupational therapists but that of complementary therapists. Does he know that, under the primary care group system, many areas do not engage homeopaths and herbal therapists, as they used to do? Will he look into that matter?

Mr. Hutton: I shall look into the matter. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman might like to stand on this side of the House when he asks questions about complementary therapy to see the expressions that they attract from the Conservative Front Bench. I know that the hon. Gentleman has a long-standing interest in the issue and I shall look into the anxieties that he raised.

Chorley Hospital

6. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): What support and assistance he makes available to Chorley hospital. [131852]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): The total projected income of Chorley and South Ribble NHS Trust for 2000–01 is £62 million. The trust is currently forecasting that at the end of the financial year it will be in a balanced position. I am sure that my hon. Friend will welcome the regional office's recent approval for an additional 30-bed medical ward at Chorley and South Ribble district community hospital, which amounts to a £1.6 million capital investment.

Mr. Hoyle: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. We welcome the new medical ward at Chorley, which is more success for the hospital. We could have even more success at Chorley hospital if we could end postcode medicine. Is my hon. Friend aware of the silly anomaly concerning the two health authorities of south and north Lancashire? If someone comes from north Lancashire and is to go to Chorley hospital, there may be an eight-week waiting list. If someone comes from south Lancashire, there is a 33-week waiting list. If we were to merge the health authorities, there would be more money for Chorley hospital. We would also end a bureaucratic anomaly within the hospital.

Ms Stuart: I am aware that in the short term the regional office is promising to support south Lancashire. The long-term solution is a strategic review of the health authority configuration. I know that Members are actively engaged in that. The health authority will have to approve the arrangements. We are proceeding to consultation, and probably towards the end of next year we might be able to reach a conclusion on the best way forward.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): A number of my constituents use Chorley hospital and its neighbour, Royal Preston hospital. I have written to the Minister several times about the case of Mr. Salthouse, who has had three heart attacks. If he is not in hospital, he spends most of his time on a sofa with an oxygen mask. He is receiving continuous morphine. His doctor has said that he is at the severe end stage of heart disease. The only procedure that will help him is percutaneous myocardial revascularisation, and the North-West Lancashire health authority says that it will not pay for it. Talk about the postcode lottery. The authority will not pay because it does not recognise the procedure. However, the procedure is carried out at St. Thomas's.

I am awaiting a response from Lord Hunt. I have been told by his office today that it has lost my correspondence, although it is ready to send a reply. Through you, Mr. Speaker, may I ask the Secretary of State to ascertain what is going on, to read the response before it is sent to me and to send a positive response to Mr. Salthouse, who is eagerly awaiting a form of procedure that will alleviate the condition in which he is living?

Ms Stuart: I shall certainly examine the individual case which the hon. Gentleman has raised. I say to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents that with this Government the way forward is to expand the facilities of the NHS through tax revenue. There should not be an expansion of the private medical health care sector, where treatment would depend on the ability to pay for it.

Beta Interferon

7. **Mrs. Eleanor Laing** (Epping Forest): How many patients are currently receiving beta interferon on the NHS. [131854]

13. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): What recent representations he has received on the provision of beta interferon on the NHS for certain multiple sclerosis sufferers. [131862]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): We estimate that between 1,700 and 1,800 people in England are currently receiving beta interferon on the national health service.

Over the past six months, my Department's records indicate receipt of approximately 2,000 written representations and four petitions from Members, patient groups and the public expressing concern about arrangements for prescribing and funding of beta interferon.

Mrs. Laing: I thank the Minister for that answer. He is fond of statistics, but that does no good for the many people in my constituency who plead with me to help them get beta interferon, which they need to try to alleviate their suffering. The Minister has not told the House that the NHS is prescribing beta interferon to less than 3 per cent. of multiple sclerosis sufferers. That is the lowest percentage prescribed by any European Union country. What recommendation has the Minister given to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to ensure that MS sufferers are not deprived of drugs that their counterparts in the EU are receiving?

Mr. Denham *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before I call the Minister, I appeal to hon. Members to be brief. We shall get through more questions if the questions—and possibly the answers—are more crisp.

Mr. Denham: I apologise for citing statistics, Mr. Speaker, but I was asked how many patients were receiving the drug and that seemed the best way of answering the question.

The question is a serious one. The answer is that we established the National Institute for Clinical Excellence because, with a number of drugs and procedures, there were problems of postcode prescribing and different patterns of treatment, which, in the case of beta interferon, directly reflected the policy, still in place, established by the previous Government. NICE is considering beta interferon. It has not yet produced its advice. The matter is, I believe, at the appeal stage within NICE. As I and other Ministers have said throughout the procedure, we will not comment publicly on NICE's deliberations until it has completed them.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Healey.

Mr. Healey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and congratulations.

Is my hon. Friend aware that seven organisations, including the MS Society, the Association of British Neurologists and the Royal College of Nursing have appealed against NICE's assessment of beta interferon? Is he aware that no Member on either side of the House who has seen the benefits that that drug can bring to some of our constituents with MS has any doubt about its cost-effectiveness? Therefore, I urge him to consider carefully the decision that he and the Secretary of State must take on the final recommendations that NICE will publish shortly.

Mr. Denham: I acknowledge the considerable efforts that my hon. Friend has made on this topic. I know that he has close links with the MS Society and others. Of course we will consider properly and carefully the recommendations from NICE when we receive them, but, as my hon. Friend pointed out, an appeals procedure is under way. Many organisations will have contributed to that appeals process. It is essential for the integrity of NICE that that is allowed to take its course without Ministers' commenting or speculating on what the final outcome might be.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I know that the Minister is aware of the concern on both sides of the House about the beta interferon issue, but does he agree that any decision by NICE to deny beta interferon to patients for whom it is demonstrably clinically effective would bluntly undermine the guarantee that was given by the Secretary of State, who said:

no one will be denied the drugs that they need.—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1998; Vol. 315, c. 143.]?

Will the Minister give an undertaking to place in the Library after the NICE decision is announced the submission that was made to the NICE appraisal by the Department of Health, so that hon. Members can see what the Department was really recommending to NICE?

Mr. Denham: On that point—it is important—I have always worked on the assumption that such submissions would be placed in the public domain, so I am happy to give a positive response. For reassurance, however, may I say that such responses as have been made to provisional determinations have invariably been of a technical nature, or have suggested that the wording may need to be clarified in the interests of wider understanding. However, the hon. Gentleman has made a fair point and I will respond positively to it in that way.

Mr. Speaker: I call Miss Anne Begg.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I add my congratulations.

Although I, too, hope that NICE will soon report on beta interferon, and that anyone with MS who beta interferon will help will get the drug on the national health service, I believe that beta interferon is not necessarily suitable for all MS sufferers. I wonder whether the Minister shares my concern that a number of MS sufferers are pinning their hopes on getting beta interferon when in their case it may not be the most suitable drug. I am wondering what the Government are doing to ensure that there is an educative process to inform MS sufferers that other regimes may be more suitable, so that they are not always waiting around for a wonder drug which, for them, may not be a wonder drug.

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Even the most enthusiastic proponents of beta interferon have not suggested that it works in all cases and circumstances. Beta interferon has never been suggested as a cure for that very distressing condition, so there is a wider set of issues surrounding the appropriate care and support for MS sufferers. Discussions have been taking place between the Department, the MS Society and NICE on the possible preparation of clinical guidelines on wider MS treatment and support.

Clinical Priorities

8. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement about the Government's policy on clinical priorities in relation to the reduction of NHS waiting lists. [131855]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The very clear guidance that we have issued states that

clinical priority must be the main determinant of when patients are seen as out-patients or admitted as in-patients.

As waiting lists fall, so waiting times, too, will fall. The NHS plan sets out how waiting times will be cut, from a maximum 18 months for in-patient treatment today, to six months by 2005, and from six months for out-patient treatment today, to three months by 2005. Our eventual aim is that there should be waits of weeks rather than months.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that information. Will he confirm that, in 80 per cent. of health authority areas, the number of patients waiting more than 12 months for operations has increased since his party took office, and that for the first time in 25 years, the number of heart bypass operations has decreased? Does not that underline the fact that the right hon. Gentleman has managed to get his in-patient

waiting lists down only by postponing complex surgical procedures and pushing through the simpler operations as well as keeping people off the waiting lists for longer?

Mr. Milburn: No, that is not true. The hon. Gentleman has heard me say before that the allegation from Tory Back-Bench Members that the number of coronary artery bypass grafts and of heart operations in general has fallen is not true. The number of operations is rising. Of course, we need to do more. That is why I have already made the extra earmarked cash available to ensure that we can carry out an extra 3,000 more heart operations this year and next year. I expect to be able to exceed that, largely because of the hard work done by NHS trusts, hospitals, cardiothoracic surgeons, theatre nurses and others up and down the country who have used the money to good effect.

Let me remind the hon. Gentleman of one thing before he starts raising some legitimate concerns that he and his hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) raised earlier about access to heart surgery. It is important to remember that, under the Government whom he supported and of whom he was a member, there was no earmarked cash available for heart operations. It was only when this Government took office that we earmarked cash for cancer and heart disease, which are what many hon. Members, and people throughout the country, would regard as the top clinical priorities.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): My right hon. Friend will be aware that increased demand can put pressure on waiting lists during the winter, particularly as a result of people suffering from flu. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the success of his advertising campaign in increasing the number of people taking advantage of the flu vaccine. *[Interruption.]* There is some evidence in my area that demand is outstripping supply.

What is the Department doing to increase awareness of the disease in terms of what precautions can be taken in the household and the workplace to minimise the number of people who contract the disease? There is a myth about how the disease is contracted which the Department could do something to dispel.

Mr. Milburn: As my hon. Friend is aware, there is a TV advertising campaign and other types of advertisement precisely to inform the public about what they can do. It is most important to ensure that those at the highest risk of serious illness if they contract the flu take advantage of the facilities that the Government have made available to them, which is to get a free flu jab. *[Interruption.]* I hear Tory Members alleging that the flu vaccine is not available. That is not true. This year we have ordered 11 million doses of flu vaccine, compared with under 8 million last year. We have also extended the range of people who are able to get access to the free flu jab. It is important that, in every part of the country, the free flu jab is offered to pensioners and others, and that people who want to take advantage of it do so as soon as possible by visiting their GP's surgery for their free jab on the national health service.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): On the issue of clinical priorities, is the Secretary of State aware that Addenbrooke's hospital has now had to cancel the prostate operation on one of my elderly constituents for the fourth time? That is not because of a shortage of surgeons or nurses but because two and a half wards are blocked with elderly patients who cannot be discharged home and because there is a shortage of some 300 private sector nursing home beds in the Cambridgeshire area. Will the right hon. Gentleman liaise with the Secretary of State for social services to get the Government to help solve that problem?

Mr. Milburn: I am the Secretary of State for social services, so I shall do my best, depending on what sort of day I am having, of course—so far, so good. The right hon. and learned Gentleman raises an extremely important point, which is that, as we now know, what happens in a hospital is directly affected by and directly affects what happens in social services, primary care, community care and, as we heard earlier, ambulance services. That is why we have to encourage much greater co-operation in the local health service. That is also the precise reason why the Government got rid of the internal market, which the right hon. and learned Gentleman supported.

GPs (East Lancashire)

9. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): If he will give additional incentives to GPs to locate in East Lancashire. [131856]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): East Lancashire health authority is aware of the problem with GP recruitment in its area and is developing a recruitment package that covers all four contractor professions. As part of that process, the health authority is proposing three new applications for personal medical service schemes; exploring the opportunities offered by salaried GPs and nurse practitioners; and reviewing its primary care investment plan to determine what other incentives can be made available through additional investments in GP premises.

Mr. Prentice: That is a good answer, but is the Minister aware that 5.5 per cent. of all the GPs in my area are due to retire in the next five years? That is the highest such percentage of any area in England outside Greater London. Perhaps the way to get younger GPs into areas where there is an acute shortage of qualified GPs is to pay them more. Will the Government apply themselves to that point?

Mr. Hutton: I am very glad that I have said something with which my hon. Friend is happy. As I am sure he is aware, however, we are paying general practitioners more. I am also absolutely sure that, if my hon. Friend wants to develop his concerns about the issue and express them to the health authority, it would be very willing to discuss them with him, as would I. My hon. Friend's area has a particular historical problem with which we have to deal. I am aware of the concerns that he and others have expressed about it, and we look forward to working with him to find a sensible way forward.

Nurses

10. **Mr. Peter Bradley** (The Wrekin): What action he is taking to increase the number of nurses working in the NHS. [131857]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): The NHS plan sets out proposals to increase the number of nurses, midwives and health visitors in the NHS by 20,000 in the next four years. That is why we are expanding training commissions; improving pay; supporting international recruitment; encouraging family-friendly working practices; and encouraging more staff to return to the NHS.

Mr. Bradley: I welcome that response, which will be welcomed also in The Wrekin and in constituencies across the country. However, can the Minister explain what action she and her colleagues are taking to recruit—and, crucially, to retain—other professional and technical staff? Would not such action help, and is it not time that such staff were included in the pay review body arrangements?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend will be aware that discussions on the future of the pay system are under way. We believe that, across the board, the pay system needs to be modernised to provide fair and affordable settlement across the NHS and to support expansion of the NHS. There were already 10,000 more nurses in place in September 1999 than there were in September 1997, and there have been other increases in the work force, too.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I should be pleased if the Minister could tell us what conversations on recruitment and retention she has had with the Royal College of Nursing since July, and what tangible progress has been made. Although some of us were interested to hear the Secretary of State say—rightly—that under-capacity is holding back development of the NHS, the president of the Royal College of Surgeons recently said that it would take 10 years before those problems were properly and adequately dealt with. Will it take 10 years before we get the recruitment and retention of nurses right?

Yvette Cooper: Christine Hancock of the Royal College of Nursing is on the NHS modernisation board, and continuing conversations are being held on recruitment and retention. There has also been much progress on nurses, such as the fact that, in the first two years of this Parliament, we have put in place 10,000 additional nurses. Considerable progress still needs to be made, but it will take time. One of the reasons why it will take time is that the previous Government cut the number of nurse training places: that is what has made it so difficult to get in place the additional nurses that we need.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): May I, too, offer my congratulations on your election, Mr. Speaker?

Will my hon. Friend put further pressure on health authorities and trusts actively to examine their working patterns and shift rotas so that nurses who want to return to work are if possible offered the flexibility that they need to combine their work and family responsibilities?

Yvette Cooper: I can certainly reassure my hon. Friend that we are very keen to increase family-friendly working practices across the NHS. That is why we have a £30 million child care initiative to support staff across the NHS. The Government strongly value the important contribution that people, especially women, can make when combining careers in the NHS with family responsibilities—unlike the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), who recently said:

> It is a fact that you will get less work out of females

than out of males.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): When Christine Hancock, the general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, said that

> We now have the evidence that the key nursing posts are being downgraded to save money,

was she telling the truth?

Yvette Cooper: Given that the previous Government cut the number of acute beds in the NHS by 43,000 between 1979 and 1997, it would hardly be surprising if the number of specialist nurses had fallen during that period. We are committed to increasing the number of nurses in the NHS, not just by 20,000 across the board, but by expanding the number of senior nurses, including nurse consultants. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced that an extra 141 nurse consultants will be appointed.

Dr. Fox: I take that rather second-rate evasion to mean that, yes, Christine Hancock was telling the truth. I wonder when Ministers will start to take responsibility for the health service, more than four years into their term of office. [HON. MEMBERS: "Four?."] They are well into their fourth year, and were they to be in office for 40 years, they would still be harking back to the Conservative Government. Is it not true that the 15,000 nursing vacancies and the 12,000 nurses who leave each year are a testament to the Government's failure in office? Is not that compounded by the lack of morale generated by the Government's endless political interference; the lack of authority for ward sisters; the lack of vaccine for patients; the return of TB to our cities; and a winter crisis that now goes on all year—all of it under a Prime Minister who says that Labour never understood the size of the problem? How can nurses, or anyone else, have any faith in a health policy that is such a complete shambles?

Yvette Cooper: Given that the hon. Gentleman is clearly so sensitive about looking back at the previous Government's record—for example, the cut in nurse training places from 15,000 to 11,000 in two years and the failure to restore the figure to the previous levels under the previous Government—perhaps we should look to the future. The Government are already increasing the number of nurses in the NHS. We have a commitment to expand the NHS and to invest additional money, year on year, in increasing the NHS—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: I cannot have the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) shouting across at the Minister. He asked a question; the hon. Lady is answering it. *[Interruption.]* She may not be answering it to his satisfaction, but she is answering it.

Yvette Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman has said that he wants to spend more than £500 million on subsidising private health insurance and more than £300 million cutting the tobacco tax against which his party voted. We have set out where

we would find the extra investment needed to expand the NHS. I should like to know where the hon. Gentleman would find the resources to make that cut.

NHS National Plan

11. **Ms Joan Ryan** (Enfield, North): If he will make a statement regarding the representations he has received on his national plan for the NHS relating to hospitals. [131858]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The NHS plan was formulated with the help of doctors, nurses and managers from hospitals and other parts of the service. It is now being implemented with their help. I have received many representations about the expansion in hospital services set out in the NHS plan. There will be more new hospitals, providing more care to more patients.

Ms Ryan: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. However, I want to raise the question of diagnostic and treatment centres for out-patients. Most people who have contact with hospitals are admitted through out-patient departments, and the throughflow of patients causes those departments a lot of wear and tear. The diagnostic and treatment centres represent an important way to keep waiting lists down, but many out-patient departments would benefit from refurbishment.

The Government have rightly concentrated on accident and emergency services, but will my right hon. Friend say how he intends to ensure that out-patient departments reach the standards that out-patients deserve?

Mr. Milburn: That is a very important question. Public and media attention focuses, understandably and inevitably, on in-patient services. There is a very good reason for that, but my hon. Friend is right to say that most people who go to hospital are seen in an out-patient department or in an accident and emergency department.

We have made a start on the problem, in part by investing new resources in out-patient departments. Those new resources were announced some months ago by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), but we must also change the way in which out-patient services work. We are not talking about rocket science: many leading out-patient departments in the country have been able to reduce waiting times by making better and more flexible use of staff—for example, by ensuring that nurses carry out more roles, and by using physiotherapists rather than orthopaedic consultants to conduct orthopaedic out-patient appointments.

Much can be done in that regard, but the NHS plan contains proposals to reform and expand the national health service, and we must ensure that the good practice of some becomes the best practice of all. We have made a start on that and, although there is a long way to go, I am confident that the commitment of NHS staff to change the way they work and the services they deliver will cause waiting times to fall in every hospital and out-patient department, not just in some.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The Secretary of State belongs to a Government who talk a great deal about devolution, but is he aware of the growing dissatisfaction among many members of health trust boards, who feel that the amount of discretion that they have is daily being whittled away by increased centralisation when it comes to setting targets, rules and so on? Is the Secretary State not worried about that?

Mr. Milburn: I would be worried if that was what was happening. However, although I have a great deal of time and respect for the hon. Gentleman, it is clear that he has not read the NHS plan. I shall send him a copy, so that he can ask me a more relevant question next time we have Health questions. The plan sets out the Government's proposals to devolve greater authority and autonomy not only to managers and trust boards in hospitals and elsewhere but, most important of all, to the front-line clinicians—the doctors, nurses and physiotherapists—who, day in and day out, do such brilliant work treating patients.

Mrs. Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): I, too, welcome you to your post, Mr. Speaker.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the role of the patient—the user of the national health service—lies at the heart of the NHS plan? Patients pay their taxes for the service, and are the best judge of its performance. Will he reassure those who have been active in developing the community health council movement that the plan's proposals will strengthen and give teeth to the concept that patients and users should be right at the heart of the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: That is very much the case. I understand the concerns expressed by hon. Members of all parties about the plan's proposal to abolish community health councils, but many people—in this House and outside it—have long argued that there is a democratic deficit at the heart of the NHS. They have said that we should strengthen rather than weaken the ways in which we monitor what the local health service, which services local communities, is up to.

I support the argument that monitoring and scrutiny arrangements should be put in place. I believe that it is therefore right and proper that we should lodge that power, authority and influence with those who have been directly elected by the local communities. In the end, it must be acknowledged that members of community health councils are not so elected, but that members of local councils are.

Mental Health Services

12. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): If he will make a statement on the resources allocated by the NHS to mental health. [131861]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): In 1999–2000, nearly £3.5 billion was spent on mental health services in the NHS. The NHS plan set out further proposals for investment in mental health services, including new teams for crisis support and primary care, and for young people.

Dr. Cable: Is the Minister aware of the report that was published over the recess by the Zito Trust, which

documented the enormous obstacles facing the severely mentally ill in getting access to the new generation of anti-psychotic drugs which limit the side effects of their treatment? Can he explain why only 12 per cent. of the country's 250,000 schizophrenics have access to these drugs? Is the reason clinical or financial?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman, who takes a great interest in these matters, and rightly so, will be aware that when we published the national health service framework for mental health, we made it clear that our first priority was to improve services for people with severe and enduring mental illness. That is exactly the right clinical, ethical and moral priority for us to have reached. The use of the atypical anti-psychotics has, as the hon. Gentleman will know, been referred to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, and we are awaiting its guidance on the wider use of those drugs.

Hunter-killer Submarines

3.30 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the Government's decision to withdraw the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines from active service.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): First, Mr. Speaker, may I say that it is a real pleasure to address you as such for the first time?

I am replying on behalf of the Secretary of State for Defence, who regrets that he is unable to be in the House today.

The Government's decision to withdraw the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered Trafalgar and Swiftsure class hunter-killer submarines from operational service was taken when it became apparent that a flaw in the pipework forming part of the reactor cooling system of HMS Tireless may be generic. As responsible nuclear operators, we decided to carry out a full inspection of all submarines of the strategic submarine nuclear—SSN—flotilla to determine whether this was in fact the case. Some of these submarines were already alongside in refit or undergoing maintenance or repair, and two deployed submarines were recalled.

Initial indications are that the defect may have arisen from the original construction of the submarine and that it is present in other submarines, albeit at an early stage. Let me stress that Vanguard class Trident submarines, which are of a different design, have not been affected.

Until the inspection programme is completed, it is not possible to finalise the repair programme or to quantify the operational implications. The repair is not complex in engineering terms, but, because of the exacting tolerances required for nuclear engineering, it may take some months for submarines to be repaired where this is necessary. The inspection regime and subsequent repair programme will clearly have an impact on our operational programme, although every effort will be made to mitigate this by using other assets and by building on the already close links that exist between the United Kingdom and United States submarine services. Appropriate measures will be taken to protect the deterrent.

I wish to make it clear that at no time has there been any risk to the crew or general public. Safety must take precedence over operational requirements in peacetime, and no submarine will go to sea unless it is safe to do so. Every effort is being made to bring the submarines back into operational service as soon as possible.

Mr. Duncan Smith: It is quite remarkable that a matter of hours after your welcome elevation to the Chair, Mr. Speaker, the Government, for all the crocodile tears shed about bypassing Parliament, chose, on this prime issue of the defence of the realm, not to come anywhere near the House to make a statement about it. After all, this announcement represents the loss of a quarter of our front-line fleet in one fell move. The Government chose simply to try and slide the news away on a quiet Saturday, without any comment.

Some answers to questions need further clarification. The Minister said that he could not give any exact times or be specific. Is the problem that our dockyard facilities are insufficient at the two places about which we have heard? If that were the case, would it be possible to use facilities in other NATO nations, and have the Government made such a request? The Minister will recognise that it is a priority to get those submarines back into service immediately.

The hon. Gentleman talked about using other assets, but what specific arrangements are there to cover this gap in capability? For example, he talked about securing the patrol of Trident, our new deterrent, but as it is clearly not possible to use surface ships to glide around indicating where Trident is, how does he intend to do that? Is there a chance that we may be able to fill some of that capability by bringing some of the Upholder class back into service by arrangement with the Canadians, to whom they are about to be leased? Would that assist, and has any arrangement been made for it?

The third question relates to the Swiftsure class, which the Minister discussed. We have two classes of hunter-killer submarines: Trafalgar and Swiftsure. Swiftsure has been in service since the 1970s, and for much longer than Trafalgar. Are the Government saying that they have discovered a problem on Swiftsure, or that Swiftsure vessels have proved pretty reliable during their time in service and that they will be the first boats to be put back into service as there is literally nothing wrong with them? Is the Minister going to withhold all boats from service simply because there may be a possible defect that has not materialised in any other vessel? Finally, what will happen to the crews during this period? Will skeleton crews be left on the boats, and will they lose some of their skills? How will the Minister cover the gap in capability for individual crew members?

Such questions ought to have been raised in the House earlier and answered immediately. The Government should not avoid their responsibilities in this way and it is essentially a damning position for them to be brought to the Dispatch Box by the Opposition on this matter.

Mr. Spellar: I thought that I had had my fill of pompous speeches yesterday, but the speech of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) follows that great tradition. In reply to his fairly inadequate response, there is a defence debate on Thursday and Defence questions on Monday, and on both occasions he could easily raise such matters without any difficulty.

I shall, however, deal with the hon. Gentleman's questions now, starting with those relating to the Upholder class of submarines, which the Conservative Government scrapped in 1993. When the Labour party came to power, that decision had already been taken and the programme was well advanced. *[Interruption.]* As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, we followed on from the previous Government's failure to dispose of the Upholder submarines which, however, we managed to sell to our ally Canada. One submarine has already gone to the Canadians and of course I have made inquiries about the availability of the others. The first one will not be available until next March, so that does not seem to be a suitable alternative.

The hon. Gentleman discussed the shortage of facilities. The critical difficulty relates not to facilities, but to the time scale of the repair. The repair itself is fairly basic and, in engineering terms, uncomplicated. However, the

[Mr. Spellar]

time for repair is increased by the need to run down the reactor, let its nuclear material cool off, and drain the coolant. The repair is undertaken, tested ultrasonically and by other means, and then the coolant is refilled, which is a time-consuming operation, given the need to prevent airlocks and so on in the system—as anyone who has dealt with radiators at home will understand, although this operation is undertaken at a much higher level of tolerance. The reactor is then started up. Frankly, repair facilities are not the bottleneck, and we are looking at making sure that we have enough teams available to undertake this work. Indeed, the Navy is working on that at the moment.

On other assets, as the hon. Gentleman rightly identified, we have surface vessels with towed arrays. We also have Nimrod aircraft, and shall examine using them more intensively, but that is satisfactory only in the short to medium term. We are already having discussions on other possible facilities with our ally the United States.

On the question of examining for the defect on the Swiftsure class, it is simply a case of looking at the cooling system and ascertaining whether individual vessels have the generic defect. If they have, we shall, of course, include them in the programme of repair and maintenance.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised another question about crews, the answer to which will partly depend on the nature of the repairs and where the vessels are tied up. As I understand the situation, if the vessels are in a tidal berth, they require more crew on board for watch and engineering functions, and engineers will also be required. If the vessels are in a non-tidal berth, fewer crew will be required.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised a question about maintaining skills through training. Surprisingly enough, the Navy is already looking at that, as I am sure he would have expected it to. Some sailors may not be required for those watch and engineering functions—if so, the Navy intends to allow them more shore leave to spend time with their families, because there will inevitably be some disruption.

Let me answer the question that the hon. Gentleman did not pose, either, in effect, in his letter or in his questions today, about the length of time involved. Until we have a full report from Navy engineers, we shall not be able to identify the length of time required. Had the hon. Gentleman waited a few days, I might have been in a better position to give him an answer.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. Does he appreciate that the people who live in communities adjacent to the relevant facilities—such as the Royal Naval Devonport dockyard in Plymouth, which will carry out the work—need to have confidence in their safety and that of their families? Will he join me in expressing confidence in the highly skilled work force and their ability to carry out the work swiftly and effectively? Will he also give me an assurance that his door, and those of his ministerial colleagues, will be open to Members and our constituents, because the spotlight will no doubt remain on this issue?

Mr. Spellar: With regard to Tireless and any of the other submarines, I reassure my hon. Friend that the safety of the crews or the general public has at no time been at risk in any way. We operate under an extremely tight and strict safety regime, and independent bodies overlook our work. We want to assure Members of Parliament and local representatives and communities of our on-going commitment to safety in this programme. I welcome this opportunity to pay tribute to the skilled work force who will undertake the work.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): From one Glasgow boy to another, Mr. Speaker, I add my warm congratulations on your elevation. On this occasion, Kelvinbridge salutes Springburn.

Does not the Minister's answer punch a substantial hole in Britain's defence capability for the foreseeable future? That capability was substantially weakened by the decision to sell the Upholder class of submarines. That decision was taken purely for financial reasons by the previous Government. This would have been embarrassing at the time of the cold war. Would it not also have been embarrassing during the Kosovo campaign, when one of those submarines was responsible for using the Tomahawk cruise missile system? Is not that an argument for fitting Tomahawk cruise missiles to the new type 45 destroyers?

Finally, does not this occasion provide an opportunity to put some flesh on the bones of a European security and defence policy? Should not the Government seek co-operation with our European allies and, in particular, co-ordinate patrols with the French with regard to the nuclear deterrent that France deploys alongside the United Kingdom?

Mr. Spellar: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for dividing the Opposition on this matter. I assure him that we have long-standing and close relations with the United States Navy in such matters and that we are already undertaking discussions with it. That welcome move should provide a degree of confidence and reassurance.

On the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about Upholder submarines, he knows that that decision was taken in 1993. Several Conservative Defence Ministers have since been through the MOD but none of them saw fit to change that decision. There is an argument that having a wider variety of vessels and types of class is an advantage. Of course, huge costs are associated with that—not only in terms of training and operational experience but in terms of support systems and maintenance facilities. That is always a required balance.

The decision to scrap the Upholder class was taken by the previous Administration. That decision has gone by and, therefore, we have to work as effectively as we can with the constraints and the vessels that we have.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I add my happy congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker on this, your first day.

The Minister said that the decision would have no effect on the Trident programme. However, he also said that it would affect the operational programme. What effect will it have on the Clyde submarine base at Faslane? As my hon. Friend knows from a recent meeting with me, we have a very committed work force there. Will

he ca'canny on the proposals for possible privatisation so that we ensure the maintenance of that base and that good work force long into the future?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend knows that discussions are taking place with the private sector on ship support and that those discussions also involve public sector yards. Indeed, even the work that will be undertaken on the submarines will involve both private contractors and the existing work force. He is right to identify the enormous reservoir of skills at Faslane. Obviously, its work force will be playing a significant role—along with those at Devonport, mentioned in a previous intervention—in getting the submarines operational again as soon as possible.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Given the immense cost of the infrastructure that is needed to maintain a nuclear fleet because of the safety implications, does the Minister think that it is time to reconsider the option of a new generation of diesel boats rather than the proposed Astute class? Will he re-examine the option for diesel-powered submarines, which are cheaper and quieter than nuclear submarines? They have been given increased capability through air-independent propulsion, are ideally suited for coastal warfare, are easier to repair and potentially have a much better export market. Is it not time to go back to basics? Surely we should not go back to Upholder, but consider the future generation of nuclear boats.

Mr. Spellar: That is an interesting proposition and one that I do not recall spokesmen on either Front Bench raising during consideration of our submarine capability under the strategic defence review. Essentially, we and a few other countries have a blue-water international capability. We would not be able to achieve that with diesel submarines, which would also not be appropriate to maintain the nuclear deterrent—unless the right hon. Gentleman is proposing that we should review that policy too.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My hon. Friend may know that I have sailed on one of these boats—with the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), the Opposition Whip—and I was particularly impressed by the high level of consideration for safety. In trying to help public understanding of the issue, will my hon. Friend stress that this was a coolant leak, not a radiation leak, and that the processes he described in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) are the normal processes engaged in when cooling down a reactor prior to such work?

Mr. Spellar: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the professionalism of our submarine fleet. I also echo his call to put the problem into perspective. Yes, it was a leak, but it was an extremely minor leak of coolant that was probably less radioactive than the surrounding Mediterranean. However, we have to be mindful of the need to maintain very high safety standards. That is why we inspected Tireless and that is why, when it appeared that there was a possibility of a generic fault, we undertook further investigations. It is also why we are looking at the whole fleet. I am sure that the House and the country would expect us to do no less than to follow those standards. Equally, we want to ensure that the fleet is back in operational service as soon as possible.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): Congratulations, Mr. Speaker.

Are there not some internal inconsistencies in what the Minister is telling the House? Is he saying that all 12 of the submarines are unsafe and unseaworthy? If so, why did it take from May until October to take them out of service? If so, how can he tell the House that there was no question of crew safety being an issue? Why do Ministers appear to have taken what would seem to have been an operational decision?

Mr. Spellar: That question sounds like one that was prepared earlier; I thought that I had actually dealt with a number of those points during my contribution, but I will reiterate them.

Once we started to inspect the fault and examine it more closely, what we originally thought was a fairly small crack turned out to be larger and, quite frankly, the external investigation techniques would not have enabled us to ascertain that. Our experts then assessed that it was possibly a design/manufacture fault and could therefore have been generic across the fleet. That is why we undertook the further investigation.

As I said before, we are looking at the faults, but they are at an earlier stage in some of the other vessels. At the same time, however—as I pointed out in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller)—we are talking about a very minor leak on the vessel. That does not mean that we did not take it seriously, but it also does not mean that there was any risk either to the crew or indeed to the general public. However, we did take the necessary prudent steps and will continue to take them. There is no inconsistency in those statements.

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): May I add my warm congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker? I cannot begin to tell you how pleased and proud I am for you and your family that you were elected yesterday.

I welcome the information that the Minister gave the House that we are due to have a defence debate—rightly so. I see that the Leader of the House is in her place. Will the Minister have a word with my right hon. Friend about holding defence debates a wee bit earlier in the week, in prime time, when more Members are able to be in the Chamber to debate such important issues? All too often, such debates are held at the fag-end of the week and not in prime time.

Will the Minister give us a status position for the Tireless submarine in Gibraltar? That is where we heard that the fault was first detected. Could we be told about the status of the repair to the Tireless?

What is the status of repairs to the diplomatic relationships with the Gibraltar Government? Some diplomatic mistakes were certainly made by either the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign Office or by both.

Mr. Spellar: I certainly hope that my hon. Friend is not implying that Thursday is not a normal parliamentary day. That might give rise to unfavourable comment elsewhere.

[Mr. Spellar]

We have been working with the Government of Gibraltar. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Chief Minister, having taken advice from an independent group of nuclear experts, indicated that the Government would not oppose the repair of Tireless. Of course, we have kept them informed of subsequent developments, and will continue to do so.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I accept that the Government experienced difficulties that were not of their own making in their dealings with Gibraltar over HMS Tireless but, given that there was known to be a problem with the vessel that prevented it from being inspected properly for five months, what steps did the Government take to look at other submarines of the same class, which we could have inspected during that long time to see whether there was a generic fault? What steps were taken?

Mr. Spellar: I believe that the hon. Gentleman has misunderstood the situation. Initially, it was thought that there was a fault within Tireless. It was only on subsequent examination—not external examination but after having opened up the system—that it appeared that it was a different fault from that originally perceived, and that, therefore, because of its nature, there was the possibility that it was a design/manufacture fault, which was more likely to be a fault across the fleet, rather than an accident. As a result of that information, it was appropriate to conduct inspections, starting with stripped vessels that were already in refit or repair, to see whether they also suffered from that fault. I believe that that is a fairly straightforward, and fairly common, engineering procedure.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): If it is not an engineering problem, might it not be—heaven help us—a metallurgical, metal fatigue problem? If so, what is the likely time scale of the repair, what is the unit cost, and are we sure that it is worth doing at all if it has to do with metal fatigue?

Mr. Spellar: I am tempted to reply to my hon. Friend in the way that I had to reply to his fellow countryman, Mr. James Naughtie, on Saturday and to say that, not being an engineer, I really need to wait on the engineers' report to have a better idea of the nature and cause of the fault and, of course, the suggested recovery programme.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): May I congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, not only on the scale of your victory yesterday, but on your positive endorsement by a clear majority of the House? I express my gratitude for this early opportunity to catch your eye.

The Minister will now be aware of the importance of this weapons system, given the problems with it. Can he say anything about the capacity for emergency deployment while the repairs are taking place? Can he say anything about the policy, announced in the strategic defence review, to reduce the fleet from 12 to 10 boats in the next few years, and whether that will be put on hold for this period or reviewed altogether?

Mr. Spellar: Mr. Speaker may be a good Catholic, but I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman's confession will necessarily redeem him so readily.

On the strategic defence review, the decision was taken to have a balanced fleet, leading to a considerable increase in certain parts of the Navy—not least the introduction of much larger carriers and the introduction of the type 45. I do not believe that the faults that we are experiencing with the current hunter-killer submarines invalidate that underlying philosophy of the SDR, which provides constraints in some areas of our operation because we are expanding in others. It was a case of striking that balance. I do not believe that this issue really addresses that.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Which countries is the deterrent now deterring?

Mr. Spellar: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be fully aware from previous answers that we do not comment on the operation of the deterrent.

Business of the House

3.58 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): May I join others in welcoming you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker, and seek the permission of the House to make a short business statement?

At the conclusion of the Opposition day tomorrow there will be a motion on the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): May I, too, publicly welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker?

I thank the right hon. Lady for her statement, with which we concur. We shall be happy to debate the Regulations at 10 pm tomorrow.

On the subject of debate, I believe that you, Mr. Speaker, are aware that, during the summer recess, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition had cause to call for the return of Parliament, owing to the national crisis caused by the fuel protests. You will know that tomorrow's Order Paper states that we intend, in Opposition time, to debate that subject, but may I, through you, ask the right hon. Lady if she would use her good offices to persuade the Deputy Prime Minister to attend the House for that debate? We understand that he is devolving that responsibility to a Minister of State and, given the importance of the subject, we feel that a member of the Cabinet should reply to the debate.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Lady will know that that is a separate matter from the business which has been announced.

Mrs. Beckett: You are entirely right, Mr. Speaker; it is a different matter. The hon. Lady will know that the Deputy Prime Minister has heard her words and she will also know that, in common with all Ministers, he has to balance the many demands on his time.

Hatfield Derailment

4 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you as our new Speaker and I should like to add my congratulations to those of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House.

With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the train derailment at Hatfield and the developments since. My noble Friend Lord Macdonald of Tradeston made a statement on this matter in another place on Thursday 19 October.

Last Tuesday, a Great North Eastern Railway train from King's Cross to Leeds was derailed near Hatfield. Four passengers died and 34 were injured. I am sure that all Members of the House will wish to join me in expressing their deepest sympathy to the families and friends of those who lost their lives. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that all but one of those who were injured have now left hospital, and the whole House will join me in wishing them a speedy recovery.

As ever, our emergency services excelled themselves in the speed and efficiency with which they responded. I know that both my noble Friend Lord Macdonald and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), who is responsible for the railways, witnessed this at first hand when they visited the scene in the aftermath of the accident.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson)—the constituency where the accident occurred—is sitting beside me, and she also visited the scene. I know that she and, indeed, the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the tremendous efforts of the emergency services, the staff of the Queen Elizabeth II hospital in Welwyn Garden City and of the Lister hospital in Stevenage, not to mention the voluntary organisations who are always there to help and to give comfort. Let me make clear my admiration for the many local people who, in the wake of the accident, instinctively came to help in any way that they could. They are among the unsung heroes whom the House will wish to recognise today.

In my view, it is unwise to jump to conclusions on the causes of the crash before the Health and Safety Executive's inspectors have considered all the evidence. Last Friday, the Health and Safety Executive issued its preliminary findings on the accident. Copies of its report are available in the Vote Office. It found obvious and significant evidence of a rail failure and no evidence so far of a prior failure of rolling stock. Early indications supported the suggestion that a broken rail was the likely cause. The safety inspectors, who are working closely with British Transport police, expect to have cleared the crash site before the end of the week. They will make public any further significant findings.

Further to its preliminary report, the Health and Safety Executive is undertaking a formal investigation into the crash, overseen by a board that includes independent experts. The conclusions will be made public and the Health and Safety Executive hopes to reach those conclusions as soon as possible. I have agreed with the

[Mr. John Prescott]

Health and Safety Executive that the investigation must look beyond the immediate causes of the crash, to any root causes, including structural and organisational factors that could have contributed to the accident.

The House is aware that Lord Cullen's public inquiry is considering the whole rail safety regime—the management, culture and regulation of safety on the railways. Any material considered to be of use to Lord Cullen will be available to his inquiry team. I am sure that the House will share my view that we should avoid delay either to the investigation or to Lord Cullen's inquiry.

As I said earlier, the Health and Safety Executive's preliminary investigation indicated that a broken rail was the likely cause of the accident. The large number of broken rails on the rail network has been a matter of continuing concern for some time to the Government, the Health and Safety Executive and the Rail Regulator. As recently as 30 June this year, both the Health and Safety Executive and the regulator wrote to Railtrack expressing their concern about this matter and requiring remedial action. They also commissioned an independent technical assessment about the management of broken rails, which will be published shortly.

The House will be aware that, in the wake of the Hatfield accident, speed restrictions were immediately placed on more than 80 sites. I understand that speed restrictions are currently in place on more than 150 sites. I have asked the Health and Safety Executive to look urgently at the immediate actions taken by Railtrack to deal with other sites where broken rails might be a potential danger, and to assure me that Railtrack's procedures are adequate and sufficiently robust to ensure safe operation.

Last night I met the Health and Safety Executive to review progress. Its inspectors are today meeting senior managers from all the Railtrack zones to ensure that the necessary safety measures are in place. Furthermore, I have asked the chairman of the Strategic Rail Authority urgently to meet Railtrack and the train operators to consider any further action that needs to be taken following the accident. Sir Alastair Morton has already held two meetings with the industry and will hold a further meeting tomorrow. On Thursday I shall meet Sir Alastair, together with the chairman of the Health and Safety Commission and the Rail Regulator, to review progress and see precisely what can be done. I shall of course keep the House informed of progress.

The Health and Safety Executive investigation is well under way and we must now focus on the way ahead. There is universal acknowledgement that the rail industry has suffered from fragmentation, a lack of leadership and decades of under-investment. We have created the Strategic Rail Authority to give leadership and direction, and published the 10-year plan—the biggest investment in our transport system for generations.

Yesterday, the Rail Regulator announced support for £15 billion-worth of expenditure by Railtrack—focusing on signalling, track maintenance and renewal—including money specifically targeted at reducing broken rails. It is the regulator's judgment that everything is now in place to equip and incentivise Railtrack to improve performance and safety on the network, with new accountability.

Today, the Strategic Rail Authority has shown by its announcement about the South Central franchise its clear sense of purpose in improving rail standards. Lord Cullen is undertaking a thorough-going examination of the safety management, culture and regulation of the railways. I stand ready to implement whatever is required as a result of Lord Cullen's proposals.

All that promises a new era for British railways. We all want a safe and well-performing railway, but the tragic event at Hatfield reminds us that, in the future as in the past, there must be no priority higher than safety. That is my guiding principle.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): May I extend to you, Mr. Speaker, my congratulations on your election and appointment?

I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement and join him in extending our deepest sympathy to the injured and bereaved. I also pay tribute to the emergency services and all those who responded so calmly and effectively.

First, will the Secretary of State join me in commending the Minister for Transport, Lord Macdonald, for the calm and responsible way in which he conducted the Government's response to the tragedy? Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to express support for the industry in the same way as the Minister? The Minister gave his personal endorsement to the Railtrack chief executive, Gerald Corbett. Will the Deputy Prime Minister take this opportunity to express his support for Gerald Corbett, whom the right hon. Gentleman's Minister rightly identified as part of the solution to a better railway?

Secondly, I agree with many of the comments in the Minister's statement last week. Does the Secretary of State share the sentiment

> that credit must be given to the railway industry for the advances made in safety management in recent times?

Thirdly, I commend the Government for resisting the temptation to go for another protracted and inevitably adversarial public inquiry, though I press the Secretary of State, as we did last week, for a special technical inquiry into the question of track management and broken rails.

The Deputy Prime Minister was determined to make the Paddington disaster a watershed for the industry. Then, he called for an end to the adversarial blame culture that has existed on the railways for years. I invite him to accept that the most recent disaster has sparked a genuinely new mood of partnership and co-operation in the industry. The crucial question is this: will the Secretary of State and his appointed regulator join the new spirit of partnership, or will the show trial summits and the blaming continue?

Privatisation has doubled Railtrack investment and billions are being invested in new trains and improving safety. None the less, we have said that changes are needed; is the Secretary of State ready to change, too? Lord Macdonald has set out the doctrine:

> of course, punctuality is important, but there is nothing more important than safety.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 October 2000; Vol. 617, c. 1201-02.]

Why do the right hon. Gentleman and his Rail Regulator continue to insist that there is no conflict between safety and train performance, when everyone in the industry knows so well that there is?

The Secretary of State accuses the industry of failing to meet its commitments, but when, on the Channel 4 news last Friday, he said of safety,

but I don't want it to be used as an excuse,

what did he mean? When he is in an aeroplane sitting on the tarmac and the captain says that there will be a 10-minute delay for some safety checks, does he think that that is just an excuse and that the airline should be sacked?

Does the Secretary of State not understand that early indications suggest that it was Railtrack's failure to apply a speed restriction on the faulty track at Hatfield that led to the fatal derailment? Does he not realise that the conflict between the fines for late trains and safety contributed to the failure of judgment on the part of Railtrack and the contractor? Does he acknowledge that, by supporting the regulator's review published yesterday, he is agreeing that those fines should be doubled, which will intensify the conflict between train performance and safety? Do the right hon. Gentleman and the regulator understand that that is what Gerald Corbett means when he calls for a change in the way the railway is run?

I do not doubt the Secretary of State's sincerity. He has campaigned for better safety in transport all his life, but is it not time that the Government provided the regulation that the industry truly needs, which works sympathetically with the safety objectives of the railway and does not conflict with those objectives? I put these points to the right hon. Gentleman as positively as I can. I hope that he will feel able to respond in the same positive spirit.

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the emergency services, and I am sure that the whole House extends its sympathy to those who have suffered from the tragedy. I have no wish to make political capital out of these events, but I must confess that, having said that he believes that privatisation was wrong—

Mr. Jenkin *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Prescott: Well, the hon. Gentleman conveyed the impression that he thought that the organisation of the railway system that he and others helped to create is wrong, so I should have thought a little more humility today would have been suitable. I know that I cannot expect that.

On safety, my answer is the same as that voiced by the Tory spokesman in the House of Lords: that

no objective commentator believes for a moment that our railways have become more dangerous during the lifetime of this Government or, indeed, over recent years.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 October 2000; Vol. 617, c. 1198.]

Mr. Jenkin: Privatisation.

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman claims the achievement for privatisation. I do not want to argue the public-or-private case; I could do so, but this is not the right moment.

We should take the facts into account. The hon. Gentleman refers to the rail summits as "show trials", which I find totally offensive. All the industry came together and said that something must be done about safety, especially after the recent railway tragedies. We now have the fewest train collisions on record, train derailments are at an all-time low and the number of significant train accidents has substantially decreased. All these things have come—[HON. MEMBERS: "From privatisation."] I prefer to thank the management in the industry for co-operating with the Government on those matters.

I do not want to get into the argument about privatisation. All I will say is that we are agreed that there is a fundamental flaw in the way in which the privatisation of the industry was presented to the House. We have tried to change that. We have established the Strategic Rail Authority, despite the Opposition voting against the Second Reading of the relevant Bill. We have introduced a 10-year transport plan setting out investment on a scale not seen in this country for decades, and we have provided the necessary resources and powers. In addition, we now have a powerful regulator. The hon. Gentleman should read the regulator's words. The regulator has said that there is no conflict between targets and safety.

Mr. Jenkin *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Prescott: The regulator is the one who has examined the matter. I am just telling the hon. Gentleman what the regulator said, which contradicts what the hon. Gentleman appears to believe.

When Lord Macdonald, in the House of Lords, spoke of the continuity of the industry, he was referring to continuity of command. He was not making a particular reference to Mr. Corbett. If the argument is about whether Mr. Corbett has done his job rightly or wrongly, I shall wait for the inquiry to make a judgment.

A matter of concern to the inquiry will be why, although Railtrack knew about the rail break in April and had been supposed to deal with it in June, it had not done so by October. That seems to constitute a management failure. There was an offer of resignation, and I assume that that meant something had gone wrong because of the management.

If the hon. Gentleman is asking me whether I will or will not give an endorsement, let me tell him that I will not. I deal with Railtrack, not with personalities. I have regulators to deal with such matters. I have a Strategic Rail Authority. I have told the House how the investigation will be carried out, and I will wait for the results. I will not take the view that, because a regulator says that something is wrong, it is wrong; I will listen carefully to the arguments.

There are issues, and I do not close my mind to them. If anything in any way interferes with the delivery of safety in our railway system, I am prepared to consider any form of change. That should be the job of anyone who has the responsibility that I have today.

Inquiries are being made, and we have taken action. Paddington was a watershed. Lord Cullen was appointed not to inquire into the circumstances in which these tragedies took place, but to examine the whole culture of safety management. I have made fundamental changes in regard to safety management: I have provided resources for safety on a scale never equalled before. I have toughened up the regulator, and reduced the organisation through franchises. Those are decisions that I made three

[Mr. Prescott]

years ago; I am not making them now. They are the right decisions, which is why we shall have a safer railway system.

I hoped that we might see co-operation from those on the Opposition Front Bench. No chance. We should not expect it: we should get on with the job.

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): May I join others in congratulating you on your appointment, Mr. Speaker, and also in welcoming my right hon. Friend's statement?

Some of my constituents were on last Tuesday's 12.10 train to Leeds, and some were injured. They, like me, will welcome the news of improvements in rail safety. Will my right hon. Friend do all that he can to ensure that more communication takes place between Railtrack and its subcontractors, so that people know who is responsible for which section of the line, and when?

Mr. Prescott: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support, and share her sympathy and concern for her constituents.

Concern has been expressed about the difficulties involving rail contracts and Railtrack, which are a matter for investigation. Mr. Corbett has complained that the maintenance contracts he inherited were fixed-price, determined by the last Government and not by him. I pass no comment on that—I am merely repeating what Mr. Corbett has said—but it is part of what will be dealt with by the inquiry. Let us wait for the results of that.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I join many others in welcoming you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker.

May I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement, and join him in offering our sympathy to those who were injured in the accident—and, of course, the friends and relations of those who lost their lives? May I also join him in congratulating the emergency services, and the many local people who came to assist?

Does the Deputy Prime Minister, like me, welcome a repenting sinner? Does he welcome a recent statement by the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) in which the hon. Gentleman at least admitted that the Conservatives had made mistakes during the privatisation of the railways? One aspect of that privatisation led to a development that is of great concern to many people. Notwithstanding the advice that he has been given by the Rail Regulator, does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that, in many people's minds, a perverse incentive scheme is operating? Railtrack is fined if it delays trains, and it is fined if it does not delay them so that it can carry out necessary safety work.

Finally, does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that a further complication is where the money is to come from to improve safety? The Rail Regulator yesterday announced more money for Railtrack for safety measures, but that money will come from the Government. It will be given to the Strategic Rail Authority, which will give it to the train operating companies, which in turn will give it to Railtrack. Why cannot the money go directly from the Government to Railtrack? Can the Deputy Prime Minister assure us that it is new money?

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the emergency services. His concerns are shared by a number of other hon. Members.

On the question whether we should welcome a repentant sinner, I am not sure that the hon. Member for North Essex is repentant. He simply uttered a few political words of convenience. If anything makes that clear, it is his statement at the Dispatch Box today. He said nothing about being wrong. He was already trying to correct the statement that most people outside thought he had made. However, it is not my job to get into an ideological argument about the hon. Gentleman.

My job is to produce a safe, modern railway. The measures that I have put in place will help us to do that. As to whether there is a conflict between incentives, the regulator says that there is not. I am prepared to listen to the argument, but the regulator says, and he has a fair point, that all he is doing in setting targets is referring to the targets set by Railtrack itself. Railtrack set the targets and it failed to achieve them.

The regulator's main concern about the breaks in the rail is that, although there was a large number of such breaks—more than 1,000 in 1980—there has been a reduction, but now the number is starting to rise. The concern of the regulator and the Health and Safety Executive is that, despite Railtrack's promises, it has not taken appropriate action to reduce the number of breaks. That is a matter for investigation. Let us await the outcome. I am keeping an open mind about whether there is a conflict in these matters. The regulator is looking into it and an inspection is under way.

I particularly asked the Health and Safety Executive to consider, in the course of its investigation, the matter of contracts and whether it causes any problems. It is the subject of complaint by the contractors as well as Railtrack.

On the question of resources, the money is extra money. That is clear to everyone from the 10-year transport plan. Also, different forms of finance, which do not have to go through the operators, can be arranged with Railtrack and the Strategic Rail Authority. There are various ways of financing the railways and we are experimenting with one or two different ways.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): May I begin by congratulating you, Mr. Speaker?

Will my right hon. Friend join me in offering thanks also to the staff at Leeds station for the efficient way in which they responded to the tragedy by making sure that any relatives arriving at the station to meet people who were on the train were cared for and provided with information?

Given that it is very likely that a broken rail caused the accident, will my right hon. Friend ask the safety inspectorate to offer advice now on the frequency with which the track should be inspected in future?

Mr. Prescott: I thank my hon. Friend for his words of support. I join him in commending the Leeds staff, who had to deal with some of the terrible circumstances arising from the tragedy. Everyone in the railway industry, at all ranks, feels deeply when such a tragedy occurs, and they all do everything they can to assist.

With regard to the frequency of inspections, I have asked the Health and Safety Executive to consider the matter. I know that the regulator is also looking into it and has arranged an independent assessment jointly with the HSE. That report is due in the first week of November

and will give us a chance to see how robust the management of Railtrack is in dealing with broken rails. It is a matter of dispute between Railtrack, the HSE and the regulator, and we shall hear more about it in due course.

I want the best possible system of safety. I have been concerned that, in the meantime, trains continue to run in places where there is evidence of broken rails or such a possibility in the future. I have asked the HSE to look at whether the inspection system and the management system are robust enough to work properly now.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): May I, too, add my personal congratulations to you on your election, Mr. Speaker?

Does the Secretary of State understand that, to the extent that he focuses the Government's energy on the problem of broken rails, he will carry the House with him? Will he confirm that Railtrack knew last December that there was something wrong with the stretch of track that we are considering? Given that, what action does the Secretary of State believe those responsible for Railtrack should take to ensure the restoration of public confidence, especially in safety under that organisation?

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. However, I should prefer it if people reserved judgment until the results of the inquiry are known. Parties to the tragedy have given far too many statements about their views on why something happened or did not happen. It is best to await the inquiry report. In the meantime, there has been publicity about the correspondence between the rail inspectorate and Railtrack, and between the regulator and Railtrack. It clearly shows that the reasons for Railtrack's failure to implement what it recommended and agreed with its contractor are well known to the organisation. That is at the heart of the inquiry, and I do not wish to say more than that.

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): Does my right hon. Friend accept that in a show trial culture, the Conservative party would be in the dock for what happened at the time of privatisation? Does he accept that the Hatfield derailment would never have happened when the railways were publicly owned because local knowledge plays an enormous part in finding weak spots, especially on high-speed tracks? As long as there is a system in which Railtrack lacks the basic skills to maintain the track and has to buy them in, the problems will continue. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish."] Opposition Members say "Rubbish", but every hon. Member knows that, from one end of the country to the other, main lines in Britain look like long-abandoned gasworks, covered with weeds, rubbish and grass. That would never have happened when specific gangs of men were responsible for individual stretches of track. The fault for the shambles of Hatfield and similar disasters lies entirely with the Conservative party.

Mr. Prescott: I do not want to follow my hon. Friend down some of that road. While I understand his points, he gives me a chance to stress that I must concern myself with the facts of the case. Let us consider broken rails. I do not know whether Hatfield would have been prevented before privatisation, but when considering the number of broken rails in different periods, hon. Members must realise that in, for example, 1981–82, there was an average of approximately 1,000 broken rails. That figure was down to about 600 in 1990 and it has now climbed to nearly 1,000 again. Throughout that time there have been different forms of management, yet there has been a high rate of broken rails. I do not want to suggest that all broken rails lead to train derailments; no more than 1 per cent. or 2 per cent. do that. However, broken rails are a serious matter.

If we consider the facts and figures for fatal train accidents in the past 25 years, the number of deaths have decreased by approximately 50 per cent. since 1975.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Congratulations, Mr. Speaker.

Many trains are now moving slowly through my constituency. It is startling to my constituents that, the day before the crash, trains were hurtling through Shenfield, whereas a couple of days afterwards, everything ground to a halt. That suggests that Railtrack knew about the specific problems there.

We must come to terms with the fact that, because more people and freight are travelling by rail, demands and strains on the track are much greater. What is considered reasonable for inspections in the context of declining stock is not reasonable in the context of growing demand, especially for heavy trucks, on our system. Does that not emphasise the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) made about the need for a clear inquiry into rail safety maintenance?

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He made a strong point. Indeed, it is one of the reasons for the terms of reference that I gave to the Cullen inquiry. I wanted the inquiry to examine not only a particular incident, but the management and safety cultures within our railway system. That is happening now.

I am sure that many people have realised that trains which were travelling at full pelt are now moving at only 20 mph. Railtrack has a responsibility to implement such policies and to maintain safe track, whether the speeds are 70 or 20 mph. I am concerned about the management procedures. Why are trains that were travelling at full pelt—presumably drivers were not told to travel at a slower speed at Hatfield—now travelling so slowly in areas where there are concerns about safety? It is about management. I think that the Rail Regulator's complaint is that the management was not adequate. I do not know—it is a matter of public comment by the regulator, and Railtrack has entered into the debate. I prefer to wait for the inquiry to give these matters full consideration and to report.

The hon. Gentleman has made a fundamental point for the Health and Safety Executive to consider when examining the Hatfield tragedy. It also involves the entire management of the railway, which Lord Cullen is addressing.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I add my congratulations, Mr. Speaker—it is lovely to see you in the Chair.

As my right hon. Friend knows, my constituents and many Members use the line in question and GNER trains. I am pleased that he has announced that the inquiry will be wide ranging and will feed into Cullen.

[Mrs. Alice Mahon]

After the disastrous privatisation of the railways—everybody agrees that it was disastrous—and the 18 years of Tory neglect, will former Tory Ministers be giving evidence to the Cullen inquiry? Will they be brought to account for the mess that they undoubtedly made of both the railways and privatisation?

Mr. Prescott: It is not for me to answer for the Opposition. Lord Cullen is taking advice from all parties. Indeed, the Opposition have given advice, but I do not know whether that was before their change in policy. Everyone should give advice to Lord Cullen on these fundamental matters. I believe that he is about to make the sort of changes necessary to improve safety on the railways that he brought about in North sea oil operations.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I add my congratulations, Mr. Speaker. All Scots will take immense pride in your elevation to the speakership.

I think that this is the first disaster that GNER has suffered. It has had an outstanding record of carrying passengers on the east coast main line through York and the Vale of York. I understand that there have been reports that the Eurostar carriages that have been added to the operation may have contributed to the higher incidence of broken rails. Will the Cullen inquiry have an opportunity to look into that?

Will the Deputy Prime Minister explain why railway disasters are treated differently from aviation and maritime accidents? Would this be a good opportunity to invoke the same procedure for rail disasters as for aviation and maritime disasters?

Mr. Prescott: On the latter point, the hon. Lady makes a sound suggestion, and one that I hope Lord Cullen will consider.

The Government and the Opposition will be giving evidence on how we might implement a more comprehensive and consistent method of dealing with safety between the different transport modes. The Select Committee has made strong recommendations on this matter recently.

As for Eurostar, any train going on to the track must go through a safety procedure. As I understand it, the Eurostar carriages have not made any difference. However, the inquiry will be considering these matters, and it is proper that it should do so.

As I waited for my train on Sunday night, I read GNER's punctuality figures. The tragedy occurred on its rail network but punctuality was about 80 per cent. There does not seem to be much of a conflict there.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): Many congratulations on your election, Mr. Speaker.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, but it is of major concern that Railtrack appeared to know that there were problems along the Hatfield stretch of line but seemed unable to force its contractors to carry out remedial work. Although my right hon. Friend will want to see the outcome of the various inquiries, will he seek some immediate assurances from Railtrack that it will put in place management systems to follow up identification of a problem where work is not being carried out and where it knows that if it does not take action there will be serious safety implications?

Mr. Prescott: I agree with my hon. Friend. As to whether Railtrack knew about the safety implications and whether contractors failed to carry out the work, that is for the investigation to determine. However, as I have said, it is clear from the correspondence that has been published by both the Rail Regulator and the rail inspectorate that there was conflict of some kind and that they were constantly pressuring Railtrack to carry out improvements in those areas. Nevertheless, the issue is best left to the Health and Safety Executive.

What I have to assure myself is that between now and that inquiry, everything is done to make every part of that railway as safe as possible and to prevent the sort of tragedy that happened at Hatfield. Of course, if there is a breach of safety regulations, there are penalties. Indeed, the ultimate penalty lies with me. If there is a serious breach by Railtrack and it fails to carry out its responsibility under its licence, I can remove that licence.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Congratulations and best wishes, Mr. Speaker, from another in the league of unsuccessful candidates.

In the short term, how quickly does the Deputy Prime Minister think money will feed through in repairs and improvements to the affected sections of the east coast main line track, bearing in mind the impact of the necessary delays and many train cancellations on the business and working lives of the north-east and the Borders, which have become used to an extremely good train service?

Mr. Prescott: Extra resources are immediately available in those areas. However, now that the Rail Regulator has given his report, the Strategic Rail Authority has to produce its strategic plan showing the order of priorities. That involves discussion with Railtrack, which is now under way. I hope that we will be able to get the report shortly from the SRA. The right hon. Gentleman will then clearly see the programme of implementation.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): I add my congratulations on your election, Mr. Speaker.

Does my right hon. Friend recall the Transport Committee report on rail safety that expressed serious concern about the management, control and monitoring of subcontractors employed by Railtrack? We all welcome the Strategic Rail Authority withdrawing the franchise from Connex, but, given that Railtrack is a monopoly controller of our infrastructure, and given the Government's decision to put £5 billion into Railtrack, how does my right hon. Friend envisage the public interest, safety and public accountability being ensured by Railtrack and its operation?

Mr. Prescott: With regard to the amounts of money that are being made available out of our 10-year transport plan—£15 billion is being made available, with £5 billion going into the track itself—the Rail Regulator has made it clear that he would like the money to be spent in that particular way as part of the licence, and intends to have

an accountability and monitoring system to ensure that it is. The Select Committee was critical about contracts. I assure my hon. Friend that that is one way in which we are thinking of toughening up the whole operation to ensure that there is accountability in that area. After all, Railtrack has an obligation to maintain a safe railway. My job is to ensure that it does, and I intend to toughen up very much in that area.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I add my congratulations on your election, Mr. Speaker.

I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) that many thousands of constituents who use the railway are generally very satisfied with the services that they receive from GNER. Were they to be asked, they would give it a strong vote of confidence, but clearly they no longer have confidence in the state of the rail track. They want to know how it can be that Railtrack knew that the track was damaged in some way and substandard, yet the train was allowed to travel at speeds in excess of 100 mph.

The Deputy Prime Minister has made many reassuring statements to the House, which I am sure will be helpful, but can he unequivocally state that there will be no question of any train operator being penalised and fined for delays on the railway if those delays are caused by having to reduce speeds over defective rail lines?

Mr. Prescott: Certainly, the concern must be to ensure that we have a safe railway system. I am a regular user of the company to which the hon. Gentleman referred. It is usually considered that 50 per cent. of the reasons for delay are the fault of Railtrack and that 50 per cent. are the fault of the operators. That varies from line to line and the regulator takes that into account when considering any fines for companies that have failed to meet their targets. We must ensure that the track is safe, that it cannot be used as an excuse for delay and that there is no threat to safety.

I must confess some surprise that, under Railtrack—it was the same with British Rail—there is no register of assets for our railway system. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) will know that from his time on the Railtrack board. It is curious that there is no register, and we have been pressing Railtrack about that for some time. We do not know how many stations there are, how long they are or the state of the track. That makes it difficult now as we talk about areas of concern. We are discussing that with Railtrack, and the Strategic Rail Authority has that as a central consideration.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Congratulations, Mr. Speaker. I should also like to congratulate the men and women who, day in and day out, operate the trains on the east coast main line on behalf of GNER. On the day in question—last Tuesday—I should have been on the 12.10 ex King's Cross to Leeds. Fortunately, I changed my plans and decided to catch the next train that stopped at Stevenage. I was actually on a train leaving Stevenage less than an hour late. That is great testimony to the men and women who operate the railway on that line.

However, I am a little worried about the existing structures. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend is prepared to comment on whether he believes that the existing structures for Railtrack and the operating companies are capable, as they stand, of halting the growing list of tragic accidents on our railways.

Mr. Prescott: The House will support the comments about the railway employees and management who deal with tragedies so quickly. I travelled by train on Sunday—there was a regular one-hour service, even into King's Cross. To deal with the challenge in that way shows tremendous adjustment to change. We all want to thank those people for their efforts. However, like all of us, their greatest concern is to maintain a safe railway system. The fundamental question is whether the system that we have inherited is adequate to maintain a modern and safe railway. In my judgment, the answer is no. That is why I introduced the Strategic Rail Authority and toughened up the regulatory procedures. It is why I introduced the resources to enable investment in modern signalling for a modern railway system and to ensure that we have safe and modern rolling stock. That is what we are doing. I believe that that will make a difference—if I did not, I would not be carrying out that policy.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): May I add my warm congratulations to you on your election, Mr. Speaker?

Given the recent increasing number of serious incidents—Hatfield, Stafford last Thursday evening and a fatality in north Wales yesterday—involving the clear failure of infrastructure, is it not blatantly obvious to everyone that, with the 150 speed restrictions, Railtrack is letting us down badly? Have the Government given any recent serious consideration to renationalising Railtrack?

Mr. Prescott: The first point is whether I am satisfied that there is a robust management system in place to deal with the difficulties on the rail track. The current evidence, particularly after Hatfield, suggests that it is not as good as it should be. That is what the inquiry will determine. The hon. Gentleman talked about the terrible tragedy on the traffic crossing yesterday. We must have a greater safety culture than there is at present. I have told the House that there has been a reduction in accidents and deaths, but they are always matters of great concern and we should strive to reduce them, and we will.

The hon. Gentleman talked about renationalising Railtrack. We should consider whether renationalising Railtrack would make the railways safer. I gave the figures earlier. Whether public or private, ownership does not necessarily determine whether the rail system will be safer. The facts are there for me to see and I have to make a judgment. The reality is that the culture is not right and has become worse, so we have to make some changes. Lord Cullen is examining those issues, which I have referred to him, and we should allow him to make his judgment on them.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I add my congratulations on your election, Mr. Speaker—words that hon. Members from the 1997 intake have never used before. We also had no idea that those clothes fitted a man.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that that track in Hertfordshire is the most densely used fast-speed track in Europe? Does he also agree that it should be inspected

[Mr. Tony McWalter]

more often than track in more outlying areas? Will he ensure that arrangements are made to inspect that track more regularly than it has been heretofore?

Mr. Prescott: I do not want to enter into dispute with my hon. Friend, but most railway people say that Clapham Junction is the busiest part of our railway system. However, his question about whether regular track inspections are being conducted to reduce the number of rail breaks goes to the heart of the investigation. Although I am sure that Railtrack would say that it was conducting such inspections, and although I should hope that the Health and Safety Executive will assure me that Railtrack's current procedures are adequate, that question will go to the heart of the investigation and the inquiries that I mentioned.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that last week, in the other place, Lord Bradshaw, who is a member of the Strategic Rail Authority, argued that there was an obvious tension between a system of penalty payments for delays and investment in track, and which obviously increases delays in the short term? In his statement, the right hon. Gentleman said that the regulator is now convinced that everything is in place to incentivise Railtrack to improve safety. Why does Railtrack need incentives to improve safety? Is it because it is a private company?

Mr. Prescott: Incentives were used by the state operation in awarding contracts, and Governments and others who award contracts offer incentives for jobs to be completed more quickly. Many reasons are given for offering incentives. However, I concede that the argument has been put into the public arena that there may be a conflict between some of the incentives and targets. I am sure that Lord Cullen will examine exactly that issue. I have also specifically asked the Health and Safety Executive to give us its judgment and conclusions on that aspect of contract work.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that we are reaching the point at which we are pouring money into those millionaire directors' pockets, but they seem to be ignoring faulty lines and all the rest of it? Does he recall the days when we voted against this Tory hybrid monster of a privatised railway? Does he also understand that there is a growing demand among the general public for taking rail back into public ownership? Hon. Members are also getting a bit fed up of handing over money to friends of the Tory party—it has to come to an end. Will my right hon. Friend agree not to rule out the possibility of taking British Rail back into public ownership, as we demanded when we were in opposition?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend will know—I agreed with him at the time; it is a matter of record—that I thought that privatisation of the railways was wrong. In votes, in Committees and in all sorts of circumstances, we opposed the model that the then Government proposed to the House, and we were right to oppose it. I now find myself as the Secretary of State with responsibility for these matters—*[Interruption.]* I hope that hon. Members will always think that I take a considered view on these matters and seek to justify my view. I have done that in this case.

As my hon. Friend will know, it is Labour party policy not to renationalise the rail system. Why is that our policy? As I argued in conference, we cannot avoid putting money into the pockets of those people. If we renationalised the railway, we would probably have to give them compensation. Although I assume that my hon. Friend would not want to do that, we would have to consider doing it. As the Euro rules and human rights legislation deal with the need to pay compensation, I cannot be free from a requirement to put money into the pockets of people who I do not want to receive it. Additionally, on top of paying perhaps £6 billion in compensation, we would have to wait two or three years to pass the necessary legislation. I would sooner be putting that money into track safety and ensuring that the system works.

As I told the House, the new Strategic Rail Authority, a 10-year investment plan, a new approach to safety and a renegotiation of the franchises will give us a different model. That model will be so successful that the Tories will have to ditch the old model and support the one that we are delivering.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Further to the right hon. Gentleman's helpful reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), does he favour the establishment of a permanent and independent rail accident investigation branch of his Department? Would he be good enough to tell the House what, if any, discussions he has had with his right hon. Friend the Leader of the House about the scope for a full debate on the Floor of the House on the final report of the Health and Safety Executive?

Mr. Prescott: Matters of time and debate are, of course, for my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, but I am constantly available to discuss such matters either in statements or in debates. *[Interruption.]* There are many matters that I am prepared to debate, and I commonly come to the House.

On the serious question about the safety structure, I genuinely have an open mind: I have not reached a conclusion about it. I certainly want to wait to find out what Cullen has to say about it. I hear what the Select Committee tells us about how we should reorganise safety, but it is a fundamental question.

I admit that, when in opposition, I complained that the railway inspectorate, which was created under a Labour Government, should never had gone back to the then Department of Transport. I held that view then and I see no reason to change it, but I shall await what Lord Cullen has to say about it, and then come forward with recommendations to the House.

Mr. Gerry Steinberg (City of Durham): I am member of the Public Accounts Committee. Last year, we considered a report by the National Audit Office on the flotation of Railtrack. The report clearly shows that the flotation was an absolute disaster for the taxpayer, track maintenance and the infrastructure of Railtrack. Even the report states that the increasingly favourable perception of investors towards Railtrack since July 1996 has been

attributed, by the various parties to whom we spoke, to a combination of factors. I shall not list all the factors, but one of the main ones was that the value of shares increased simply because people knew that Railtrack would not invest in the maintenance and structure of the lines, and Railtrack admitted that it did not know what the state of the track was.

We recently met Mr. Gerald Corbett, who suggested that one way forward could be a public-private partnership between the industry and the Government. Has my right hon. Friend considered whether that is a possibility? While not necessarily renationalising the industry, it would at least put it partly under Government control.

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend makes several important points about the way in which public assets were sold off at a disgraceful rate. That concern has been looked at by the National Audit Office and various Select Committees. That sell-off meant an awful lot of money for a few people. The irony for myself and for those who opposed Railtrack was that the greater our determination to get the then Government to drop their privatisation proposal—it was at the time of the 1992 election—the more it was said that we were forcing down the price, and that as a consequence when we were elected the price shot up and many people made an awful lot of money. In fact, our argument was that the then Government waited to sell British Telecom until after the election, so they could have done the same with Railtrack—but so be it; that is a matter of history.

With regard to whether we should hold shares in Railtrack or use a public-private partnership, as my hon. Friend may know we still hold 1 million shares in Railtrack, or about 0.2 per cent. of it. The Opposition always thought that we would use the Strategic Rail Authority to renationalise the rail industry by buying shares. There is a difficult balance between the Government owning shares in Railtrack and accepting responsibility without any control. Such matters are constantly being put to me, and my mind is not totally closed to all those issues.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): May I join the congratulations that have been extended to you, Mr. Speaker?

May I also join the Deputy Prime Minister in paying tribute to the role of the emergency services and the two hospitals in Hertfordshire—the Lister hospital and the Queen Elizabeth II hospital—and to the response of local people?

Although the terrible tragedy happened on the fast line of that stretch of track, there is also a slow line, which serves commuters and others from Hatfield and Potters Bar. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that safety checks should be every bit as stringent on that section of the track as on the fast section?

Mr. Prescott: Absolutely.

MEMBER TAKING THE OATH

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath:

Rev. Robert Thomas William McCrea, for South Antrim.

Points of Order

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I wish to raise a question regarding a breach of the courtesies of the House. It reached my attention only a little while ago, so I was not able to give you advance notice of the matter in writing.

At 12 o'clock today, the Select Committee on Defence presented a substantial report on Kosovo. As you know, Mr. Speaker, the rule of the House is that the Government are required to respond in writing to the Defence Committee within 60 days. However, by 2.30 this afternoon, the Government had held a press conference to reply to the report. Is that a breach of courtesy, or is it merely the greatest possible accolade for a damning report?

Mr. Speaker: There has been no discourtesy in the way in which the matter has been conducted.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will be aware that during the summer my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition called on the Prime Minister to recall Parliament, so that hon. Members could discuss the grave crisis that the nation faced as a result of the fuel protests. The Government admitted that the protests almost brought the country to its knees, and they are now taking emergency measures to combat any future crisis.

Tomorrow, the House will have its first opportunity to debate the crisis. A few moments ago, the Deputy Prime Minister told my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) that he was always ready to come to the House to discuss important issues. However, he has decided that he will not reply to tomorrow's debate, and that a junior Minister will do so instead.

In view of what was said yesterday by all the candidates for the speakership, and of the Government's acknowledgement—

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): This is a speech, not a point of order.

Mr. Speaker: Order. There is only one Chairman in this establishment. If the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) is making a point about which Minister is to deal with a debate, I can tell him that that has absolutely nothing to do with the Chair.

Mr. Maclean: I appreciate that point, Mr. Speaker, but in your normal discussions with the representatives of the usual channels will you, as a new and respected Speaker, point out that the fact that neither the Prime Minister nor the Deputy Prime Minister will be present to answer a debate on the gravest crisis facing the country is a slight injustice—not to say a grave insult—to the House? However able the junior Minister involved may be, does not putting him or her forward to respond to the debate mean that justice is not being done to this important matter?

Mr. Speaker: I will be present for the debate, and it is possible that the right hon. Gentleman may be too. That is all that he has to worry about, so that will be all right.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. The right hon. Member for

[Mr. James Gray]

Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) made a fine speech yesterday about re-establishing the primacy of the House, in which particular reference was made to the fuel crisis. We welcome you to your post, Mr. Speaker, but surely, if you are to take steps to re-establish the primacy of this place, you must allow Back-Bench Members to have the ear of the Deputy Prime Minister when we raise our constituents' very real concerns arising from the fuel crisis?

Mr. Speaker: These are not matters for the Chair.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I urge you to look at the innumerable pronouncements made by your predecessor, in which she made clear her concern about the House's loss of authority in our national life? You, Mr. Speaker, were among the many candidates in yesterday's election who shared her concern. Your predecessor frequently deprecated the behaviour of Ministers in the treatment of the House.

May I therefore invite you, Mr. Speaker, to set out to the House, and for the benefit of the Government Front Bench, what your feelings are on this matter? How do you believe Ministers should treat this House in terms of making statements here rather than on the Radio 4 "Today" programme, and in appearing here to be answerable to us on important occasions, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) has pointed out?

Mr. Speaker: I would not want to make comments on these matters.

Mr. Bruce Grocott (Telford): Further to the point of order raised by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), Mr. Speaker, do you share my concern that on a simple issue such as that of who speaks from the Government Front Bench it appears that many Opposition Members, including senior figures such as the right hon. Gentleman, are not aware of the simple rule that this is not a matter for the Chair but for the respective Government and Opposition? Could you arrange for a crash course in procedure for Members who do not understand that?

Mr. Speaker: I am always willing to give guidance on procedure, but perhaps on another occasion as I am quite busy these days.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. When you come to give that guidance, perhaps you could advise the Prime Minister's parliamentary private secretary that we do not expect to be lectured by No. 10 Downing street through the Back Benches of the Chamber.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I hope that this is definitely a point of order.

Mr. Bercow: It most assuredly is a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Will you confirm, with the full authority of your office, that public support for this institution is dependent upon an understanding of its procedures? Is it not the case that right across the country, large numbers of people of all political persuasions and of none fail to understand the sudden afflictions of shyness and reticence that occur when Secretaries of State are called upon to answer Opposition-day debates?

Mr. Speaker: There is one thing for sure—the hon. Gentleman is not shy, so I would not worry about that.

Employment (Religious Beliefs)

5.2 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to allow certain employers to have regard to the religious beliefs of those whom they employ; to make provision with respect to the application of European Community law to those employers; and for connected purposes.

It is, I am sure, a matter of agreement among all Members of the House that we have a very fine tradition of tolerance in our society. Indeed, it could be argued that long before the American melting pot was consolidated or even dreamt of, we were creating our own melting pot among the English, the Scots and the Welsh. Sadly, our record with the Irish was not so successful. Therefore, during the 19th century, we came to the conclusion that above all we had to be tolerant towards all religious organisations. We recognised that they should be allowed to conduct their affairs in their centres of worship and schools in their own way. That is the system of tolerance that we have built up so successfully in our nation over the past 100 years.

People may ask how all that is relevant to a European Union employment directive. It is very relevant. None of us can argue with the sentiments of the EU directive to ban intolerance on the grounds of race, sexual orientation or religious belief. That is absolutely fine and none of us disagrees with any of it. The problem arises—this is where that happy phrase about the road to hell being paved with good intentions comes in—when we set the overall western secular ethic against the ethic of particular religious organisations. They may have their own ethics and beliefs; they may want to do things in their own way.

If Members were honest with themselves, they would recognise that there are many aspects of some religions—perhaps all religions—and perhaps even of their own with which they fundamentally disagree. Some westerners may have difficulties with the Hindu caste system or with Muslim dietary laws. However, surely we have the sense to accept that other religions should run their religious schools, organisations and bodies in the way they want. My Bill is very simple indeed, as it tells the Government that they should step in and exempt religious bodies from the EU employment directive. To give them credit, the Government have been negotiating those points in Europe, and the Irish Government have worked hard on such matters.

There is now a view that we can take into account the ethos of religious organisations. So far, so good, but does it go far enough? I think we have solved a problem that arose in Holland, where somebody who applied to a theological college for a position was turned down on the basis that he was an atheist and immediately appealed to the courts on the grounds that he had been discriminated against. I think we have dealt with that. Nobody now doubts that Jewish organisations should be able to insist that a Jew should be appointed as a rabbi, or that bishops should believe in God—*[Interruption]*—in any event, if that is the wish of the Church in question—[HON. MEMBERS: "What about the Church of England?"] Steady!

We have made some progress in these matters but problems arise with other jobs. We have solved the problem in Church schools to the extent that a Church school can insist that a teacher of religion should subscribe to that religion, but what about the other teachers, who are not engaged in teaching religious studies? What about the people employed in a Church social organisation? Surely the very raison d'etre of many religious organisations—what drives them and gives them impetus—is that they are made up of believers. Their belief may not be our belief—nor are we talking just about an abstract belief or a vision of God, since some people—and it may seem a quaint idea—beleive that one should not only subscribe to a point of view but should live one's life according to it. Living in such a way can be difficult. All the great religions of the world make severe demands on their followers. None of us can follow all the demands of our religion—we would be saints or gurus if we did. Surely, religious organisations have the right to insist that people behave in a certain way, even if that goes to the heart of their private life, runs contrary to our general secular ethic in the west and attacks the position of certain people and minorities.

Yesterday, we elected as Speaker a man whose faith, for four centuries, meant that he would not have been allowed to pass through the door, let alone take the high office that he now occupies. We have done away with that kind of uniformity, and the House no longer insists on a uniformity of belief or religion. However, are we not in danger of allowing one minority to start attacking and persecuting another and allowing some people to set their conscience, will and view of society over others?

I am not asking anyone in the House to accept the point of view of any religious organisation or the sorts of demands that they make on their members in the conduct of their lives. All that I ask is that the House respect the position of religious organisations, which should be allowed to insist that their members conduct their lives in a certain way, if that is their wish. The Labour party insists that those who work for it are card-carrying Labour members. That is its right and is fair enough. However, if the Labour party can insist that only card-carrying members work for it, cannot a Church school, a Catholic social club, an Anglican youth organisation or a Muslim organisation insist that people who work for them subscribe to all their beliefs?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), is giggling.

Mr. Leigh: I believe that my point is fair.

One of my first speeches was based on Franklin Roosevelt's four freedoms, which include freedom from want and fear, freedom to engage in one's own form of expression, as well as freedom from religious persecution. Nobody is suggesting that anyone in Europe wants to persecute others—that is not my argument. There has, however, been a flood of correspondence on the subject, and much debate in the Council of Ministers. The Government should make the position clear and get it right by introducing a Bill similar to this Bill to exempt religious organisations. That would allow us to proclaim Franklin Roosevelt's freedom and allow people to conduct their religion and their religious organisations in the way they want. That is all that my Bill seeks to do.

5.10 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) for setting out so lucidly the reason why he believes the Bill is necessary.

[Dr. Evan Harris]

The hon. Gentleman discussed the fact that the European directive does not give sufficient exemption. He and the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), whom I am pleased to see in her place, will know that many hon. Members feel that exemptions in the European directive already go too far in allowing discrimination against groups of people by religious organisations. It is important to recognise, as I hope the hon. Gentleman accepts, that a balance can be achieved. The right to religious freedom should extend only to the point at which the rights of other people are not infringed. We do not allow the religious freedom to carry out fatwas against inhabitants of this country because, to put it mildly, that would damage the rights and interests of other people.

I want to explain why the Bill and its approach must be opposed. I do not oppose the Bill because it represents an attack on religion—in fact, one of its welcome features is that it would provide some protection for individuals with a religious belief from discrimination in employment. However, a balance has to be struck between the rights of religious organisations to express or act on their views and the rights of other people not to have their rights curtailed.

It is important to clarify the definitions used in this debate. The hon. Gentleman said that the Bill would protect people from being discriminated against on the grounds of sex, but that is not the case. The equal treatment directive already does that. Interestingly, he omitted the right that the directive will give of protection against being discriminated against at work on the grounds of sexual orientation, although he said that he supported all the rights that the directive conferred. I am delighted that he applauds the introduction of the right, which does not presently exist in this country, not to be dismissed or discriminated against at work on the basis of sexual orientation. When the legislation is implemented, it will have that effect.

There is concern that too wide an exemption for religious bodies to discriminate on the basis of religious ethos or views would mean that anyone employed, regardless of his or her role, by a private religious organisation or a public organisation with a religious input is likely to be discriminated against—not employed or sacked—because of private sexual behaviour. The hon. Gentleman said that we should expect people's private religious beliefs to be respected. He said that we should not expect people to be able to carry out in their private lives all of the wishes of religion, but we should respect what they are able to do. Many people who are employed by a religious organisation but who do not comply with its rather narrow view of what is right in terms of sexual orientation would be fearful if religious organisations were able to discriminate in that way.

The hon. Gentleman discussed the salutary example of this House. For many years, ours has been a Christian country, and many people still describe it in that way. That does not mean that we should limit membership of the House, which represents that so-called Christian country, to members of the Christian faith. The hon. Gentleman would, I am sure, be among the first to deplore that if it were proposed. Similarly, there is no reason why a religious charity or a public organisation with a religious impetus should insist that all its employees should be active believers of that faith.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the interesting subject of religious schools, suggesting that the schools belonged to the relevant religion. We must recognise, however, that Church schools, for example, belong not to the Church but to the nation—they are maintained schools. Fifteen per cent. of capital funding and 15 per cent. of running costs comes from the relevant Church, and 85 per cent. comes from the taxpayer and the state. There is no reason why those schools should be seen as entirely religious entities that have full control over their staffing.

I am prepared to concede some of the hon. Gentleman's examples. A rabbi—he or she—needs to be Jewish to be employed as a rabbi. A religious education teacher in a school of a particular religious ethos is required to be a believer in name and practice, although that is a controversial view. Some people argue that what matters is whether one can teach religious education according to that ethos, not whether one goes to church 49 or 30 Sundays out of 52. I am also prepared to accept that if the Labour party decides that membership is necessary to carry out a political function in that party, it is also a genuine occupational qualification. I suspect that, in terms of one's beliefs, in today's Labour party the requirement goes further than merely carrying a card, but that is as may be.

What I am not prepared to accept—and I urge the House not to accept—is that caretakers in so-called Roman Catholic schools need to be Catholic to do their job, and the same is true for Church of England schools. I am also not prepared to accept that nurses in palliative care centres need to be Catholics if those centres are partly or totally funded by that Church.

We are talking about a genuine occupational qualification. If the exemption goes any further we will give carte blanche for the infringement of other people's rights—the rights of Protestants to work as maths teachers in Catholic schools, of Roman Catholics to work as geography teachers in Jewish schools, and of Catholics to work as French teachers in Church of England schools.

There are 100,000 teachers in so-called religious schools, which provide 15 per cent. in terms of funding. That is a lot of people whose rights might be threatened—and that is just the teaching staff—by the introduction of too wide an exemption. On the basis of too wide an exemption, a range of members of staff of organisations that are partly funded or entirely owned by religious organisations could be sacked or might not be employed.

Nothing that I have said is intended to decry the huge amount of wonderful work that religious organisations do in the charitable, voluntary and educational fields. The message to those organisations must be that the state welcomes that involvement and the practice of those beliefs and, within reason, their promulgation, but not to the point of infringing other people's rights to employment and its benefits, unless a genuine occupational qualification is required, such as that for vicars, rabbis and RE teachers.

On that basis, in the spirit of tolerance that the hon. Gentleman cited in his opening remarks, I urge the House to reject the Bill and the idea behind it, although I will not press it to a vote.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business), and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Edward Leigh, Mr. Peter Lilley, Mr. Donald Anderson, Mr. Simon Hughes, Mr. Bowen Wells, Mr. Stephen Pound, Mr. Colin Breed, Rev. Martin Smyth, Mr. Andrew Rowe, Mr. Gerald Howarth, Mr. Christopher Chope and Mr. Nigel Waterson.

Employment (Religious Beliefs)

Mr. Edward Leigh accordingly presented a Bill to allow certain employers to have regard to the religious beliefs of those whom they employ; to make provision with respect to the application of European Community law to those employers; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 3 November, and to be printed [Bill 175].

Orders of the Day

Insolvency Bill *[Lords]*

[Relevant documents: The Second Report from the Trade and Industry Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 112, on the draft Insolvency Bill and the Government's response thereto, HC 237.]

Order for Second Reading read.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Dr. Kim Howells): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Given the way in which this debate has been trailed in speeches and interviews during the past 24 hours by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), perhaps I should be a little more muted as to the virtues of the Bill than I might otherwise have been. After all, it is easy for a humble Trade and Industry Minister such as myself to get excited about a modest Bill such as this one, designed as it is to help enterprises and small businesses to make a success on behalf of the nation.

I freely admit that I do not have the vast experience and visionary perspectives of my right hon. Friend. It was my right hon. Friend who used parliamentary time to introduce legislation to allow, for example, the construction of a fleet of Concorde jet aircraft and the administrative triumph of the advanced gas-cooled reactor programme. I have to settle for something that will not cost the nation billions of pounds. Nor, I am afraid, will the Bill allow the likes of Sir David Frost, Andrew Neil or Dame Joan Collins to hurtle back and forth across the Atlantic—suitably refreshed—promoting peace between nations. Such ministerial triumphs are reserved—quite properly—for our political giants.

I, on the other hand, will state only simple pleasure at being able to bring this now famous Bill, which I even heard trumpeted on the "Today" programme this morning, before the House. The measure will make important changes in insolvency law. The broad purpose of those changes is clear: to support the Government's determination to make our country one that encourages enterprise and is a good place to do business.

That determination needs to be supported by appropriate measures to increase business confidence. One of the things of which we need to be sure is that those entering and operating in the marketplace can have certainty as to what will happen if a business gets into financial difficulties, or if—ultimately—it fails. We need appropriate and effective procedures to deal with such eventualities.

Inevitably, there will be cases where businesses get into short-term financial difficulties for one reason or another, but that should not mean that the only—or even the usual—way out of those difficulties is to bring the business to an end. That cannot be in the best interests either of those who have a stake in the business—its suppliers, customers, creditors, employees and so on—or of the wider economy. If the underlying business is fundamentally sound, we need procedures that will make a rescue possible.

Of course, there will be many cases where there is no realistic prospect of rescue or rehabilitation. Within the procedures for handling those cases when a business does

[Dr. Kim Howells]

come to an end there is a particular need to be able to deal appropriately with those people whose misconduct brings about the failure. If we do not do that, confidence will be undermined and enterprise will not be encouraged—in fact, quite the contrary.

Both the Insolvency Act 1986 and the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 already go a long way towards providing such a regime. The measure will build on that by introducing important amendments and improvements to existing procedures.

In a market economy, it is inevitable that some businesses will fail. The reasons for that are many and varied. When that happens, those failures have consequences—not only for the creditors or the employees but for the wider community. If at least some of those companies could be rescued, it is probable that creditors would receive a better return than on a winding up; jobs would be saved and the companies would continue to make a positive contribution to the economy.

The Insolvency Act, which came into force more than 13 years ago, brought the company voluntary arrangement procedure into our law as a means of rescuing companies. Since then, the number of such arrangements has risen, from 21 in 1987 to 475 in 1999. The introduction of that procedure, which allows a financially troubled company to reach a binding agreement with its creditors, was a fairly radical development, because it focused on rescue rather than on winding up. However, the recession of the early 1990s showed that it was not particularly appropriate for small companies in financial difficulty. As there is no stay on creditors' actions, before an arrangement is agreed, creditors are able to take individual recovery action—such as levying execution on the company's goods. That is the real problem. As a result, the company may, for instance, lose its stock-in-trade and so simply be unable to continue in business, and that renders a voluntary arrangement unworkable and dooms any rescue attempt to almost certain failure. What is clearly needed is a stay—but a relatively short stay—on creditors' rights, so that the company's management can have the opportunity to put a rescue plan to the creditors.

Of course, there is always the administration order procedure, which does now provide for a moratorium; but the problem for the small company is that, generally, the procedure is too costly for it. There is also an understandable reluctance on the part of management—especially owner managers—to use the procedure because they know that they will be displaced by a court-appointed administrator. So the Bill will give a company's management the option of obtaining a short breathing space within which to put a rescue plan to creditors, and it will stop creditors enforcing their rights, initially for a period of up to 28 days. The provision of that moratorium in the Bill will honour our commitment to

> act quickly to introduce a legal right for a small company in financial difficulty to a moratorium on its debts for a limited period in order . . . to put together a rescue package.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I am much obliged to the Minister for giving way at this point. I agree that the Bill has many useful parts, but will the hon. Gentleman look at one subject in particular—the situation where an insolvency practitioner is brought in? I know from personal experience of the law that there have been many cases where the exceedingly high fees that insolvency practitioners charge tip the business into the red and that ruins the whole situation from day one. Will the Minister or his Department examine the question of those scale charges, which are, to put it mildly, exorbitant?

Mr. Howells: I thank the hon. Gentleman; he has made a very important point. Later in my speech, I shall address the subject of what we are terming, for now at least, nominees, who may well be able to offer services that at the moment can be provided by insolvency practitioners only.

Some people have questioned whether now is the right time to be acting as we are, when we are reviewing and consulting on what more might be done to improve the prospects for company rescues generally. We see no inconsistency in this. We think that there is little doubt that a stay of creditor actions is an essential part of any rescue procedure. The review of company rescue and business reconstruction mechanisms is looking at potential barriers to rescues, including, but not limited to, those that might be achieved by way of a company voluntary arrangement. What we are doing here is putting in place the first building block in our work on company rescues. The measure is needed now, and it should not have to await the outcome of a wider review. To delay it now would mean that more businesses might be put at risk and unnecessarily lost.

In summary, we propose that directors should remain in control of the company and its business during the period of the moratorium. To obtain that moratorium, the directors will first have to obtain, and file at court, a statement from the proposed nominee to the effect that the proposed voluntary arrangement stands a reasonable prospect of being agreed and implemented. Subject to the agreement of the creditors, the nominee will become the supervisor, and therefore oversee the implementation of the voluntary agreement once it is agreed.

The moratorium would last for up to 28 days, but it will be extendable by up to a further two months with the agreement of the creditors—so it could last for a maximum of three months. It will also be binding on all parties. During the moratorium, the nominee will have the task of monitoring the company's activities. If it appears at any stage that the proposal is no longer likely to be accepted by the creditors, he will have to withdraw his consent to act as a nominee. That will have the effect of bringing the moratorium to an immediate end. There will be penalties for directors who seek to abuse the process by making false representations to obtain a moratorium or by seeking to spirit away assets or business records under the cover of the stay. There will also be restrictions regarding the disposal of assets during the moratorium.

The issue involves balancing many competing interests—those of the company, shareholders, suppliers and creditors, employees and others. However, we think that the proposals in the Bill represent the best fit for all concerned.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The Minister referred to misconduct by directors, but I have at least one constituent who is extremely concerned about misconduct

by an insolvency practitioner. Will this narrowly drawn Bill do anything about the regulation of practitioners, or can we expect further legislation in the near future?

Dr. Howells: That issue is being considered by the independent company law review that is under way at the moment, and I understand that it is being examined from several directions. It is an important point, because if the insolvency practitioner is considered to be guilty of misdemeanours, the whole process is put in jeopardy. That certainly will do nothing to help a company that is desperately seeking a means of rescue. However, when I come to this point later, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to draw comfort from what I shall say about the way in which the behaviour of insolvency practitioners and, subsequently, nominees and company directors will be monitored and reviewed.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, especially as I unavoidably missed his opening remarks. Will he tell the House whether the regulations that flow from clause 13, and that relate to the model law on cross-border insolvency, will be subject to the negative or to the affirmative resolution procedure?

Dr. Howells: I shall certainly come to that point, because it is important and we should deal with it properly.

Mr. Bercow: The Parliamentary Private Secretary is seeking guidance.

Dr. Howells: I do not need the notes actually, but it was a good gag.

In the past few days, we have received several representations about possible difficulties that the introduction of the option of a moratorium might pose for what are known as special purpose vehicles—SPVs. They are ordinary Companies Acts companies, but they are often used in quite complex structures, particularly in relation to large-scale financing operations. Because the proposal to introduce a moratorium has been widely known about for some time, it is unfortunate that the potential problems appear only just to have been identified. However, from the discussions that my officials have had with those who have raised the matter, it is fair to say that the problem seems to arise from what we are told will be an assumption made by those institutions that are involved in such large-scale financing.

Overall, the sums of money involved are large and those institutions are worried that the proposal that small companies should be able to obtain a moratorium risks upsetting agreed arrangements. If that risk is perceived to be real, financing the arrangements will become more expensive and, we are told, the United Kingdom will become a less attractive place within which to base such arrangements. Clearly, we do not intend the Bill to have such a consequence, so we are urgently considering ways in which the problem might be addressed for the future and for existing arrangements.

However, in view of the complexities involved and the time likely to be needed to resolve them, our view is that it would not be sensible to address that matter in the Bill. Instead, we are considering whether the appropriate approach would be by way of modification of the eligibility criteria for obtaining a moratorium. Therefore, the Bill proposes a power for the Secretary of State to modify the eligibility criteria by regulations. That may be the best way to deal with the issue once we have determined the real extent of the problem. In case anyone should think that in that way the House might be deprived of the opportunity to debate the issue, let me say that the proposed regulation-making power will be capable of being exercised only by way of the affirmative procedure.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): My hon. Friend has just said something that worries me greatly. He is effectively saying that we should give a Second Reading to a Bill which—admittedly rather belatedly—vested interests have said might damage them and might not be workable, and that he will take account of those representations in regulations. That is an alarming mess to put before the House. Rather than a special procedure for small companies, would it not be more sensible, even at this stage, to apply to all companies the more simple option of a chapter 11 provision, as in the United States, which protects for a period companies such as Chrysler, which is facing going bust?

Dr. Howells: No, I do not think that a chapter 11 route is the right one. Chapter 11 is really a licence for lawyers to print money. The previous Government and this Government steered away from that because it is not the best method of addressing the problem. My hon. Friend's point about the lateness of the objections is important, but it would be wrong to pretend that we ought not to take the problem seriously. It needs to be raised before the House. I have explained one way in which we can address it, and I hope that that will be a good way of doing so.

I should like to take a little further the question of chapter 11 in the United States of America and why we have not adopted a procedure based on it. It is notoriously complex, time-consuming and very expensive. Unlike our procedure, it entails extensive court involvement. Virtually all major steps in chapter 11 require court approval and result in high lawyers' fees. Moreover, there would be serious practical problems in adopting a system that has its roots in a very different business and legislative culture.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): Did my hon. Friend take into account the fact that chapter 11 is no panacea in the United States? It is bandied about, but closer examination of the statistics suggests that it is not used in every instance. Indeed, it is used quite selectively, often owing to the difficulties that he has just described. The cases in which it is used and works tend to be those in which such arrangements would work anyway.

Dr. Howells: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. Perhaps when my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) contributes to the debate he can explain to us the virtues of bringing chapter 11 to the United Kingdom, because I cannot see them.

The Bill will also make other modifications to the company and voluntary arrangement procedures in the Insolvency Act 1986 to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. One difficulty with the present schemes is that they do not bind creditors who are not notified at the meeting called to consider the proposal for a voluntary arrangement. That is an important point because the

[Dr. Howells]

phenomenon is pretty wide ranging. It means that, if a previously unknown creditor suddenly comes to light—perhaps for a substantial and unexpected claim for, say, faulty goods—that creditor can pursue the company for the full amount of its claim. The result might be that the voluntary arrangement collapses, with disastrous consequences for all concerned. The Bill therefore provides that across the piece—in company or individual arrangements, with or without a moratorium—unknown creditors will be bound by a voluntary arrangement. Of course, appropriate safeguards will also have to be provided to prevent unfair prejudice.

Another problem is that both creditors and shareholders must agree to a company voluntary arrangement before it can be implemented, and that can sometimes be extremely difficult. In the majority of cases, the company's financial position is such that, if it were to be liquidated, only creditors would receive any payment. The Bill recognises that fact and provides that, in the event of disagreement, decisions of creditors' meetings will prevail over those of shareholders. That will obviate the risk of losing what might otherwise be a workable rescue simply because shareholders cannot or will not agree to all or part of it. However, there will be appropriate safeguards for shareholders' interests.

On the question raised by the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), we consider that, in addition to insolvency practitioners, there may be others who have the skills needed to turn around ailing companies. In recognition of that fact, we have included in the Bill a provision that will allow the Secretary of State to recognise a body whose members could act as nominees or supervisors of voluntary arrangements. We want greater use to be made of voluntary arrangements and to ensure that those who have the skills needed to make rescues work are able to contribute.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) mentioned disqualification undertakings. The power to disqualify rogue directors is an important safeguard for business and public alike. In the past two years, we have disqualified more than 2,800 unfit directors. If confidence in the market is to be maintained, it is essential that those who abuse the protection of limited liability and use companies to cheat creditors are disqualified. We believe that, when the Secretary of State and the director are agreed that disqualification is appropriate, it is in everybody's best interests to achieve it as quickly and as cheaply as possible, and the Bill provides for that.

Currently, only the courts can disqualify. The vast majority of disqualification orders are made on the application of the Secretary of State under section 6 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act. They are based on evidence of unfit conduct in relation to insolvent companies. However, the process can and does take a long time and it can be expensive for all those involved. The courts have been helpful in devising a procedure, known as the carecraft procedure, whereby an individual can consent to a period of disqualification, but a disqualification achieved in that way still requires court proceedings to be instituted, with delay and cost frequently being the result.

The Bill provides that, when there is agreement between the Secretary of State and the director, disqualification can be achieved administratively, without the involvement of the courts. When the Secretary of State considers that an individual should be disqualified in the public interest, he will be able to accept from that individual an undertaking not to act as a director for a mutually agreed period of between two and 15 years. The Bill also provides that breach of the terms of such an undertaking will carry the same criminal and civil consequences as breach of a disqualification order, so there will be no diminution in protection for business and public. Concluding matters by way of an undertaking will be possible in the circumstances set out in clause 6, and those in clause 8 following a Companies Acts investigation. Undertakings will also be a matter of public record.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Does the Minister agree that it would be helpful to the public to know the basis on which undertakings were given? Should there not be a statement of the facts, so that there can be no subsequent dispute about facts that were agreed by the director who gave the undertaking?

Dr. Howells: I have a great deal of sympathy with that approach, but it is the subject of careful review in several quarters. If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, as soon as I receive some constructive advice on this important issue, I shall let him know about it. I hope that that is a sufficiently diplomatic response.

Only 10 per cent. of disqualification proceedings are contested and go to a full hearing; of the remainder, 60 per cent. are unopposed and directors consent to the making of the order in the other 30 per cent. of cases. That suggests that there is a need for such undertakings. This measure should result in earlier protection at reduced cost by cutting the number of cases that go to the courts.

Of course, not all directors will agree that they should be disqualified, so the existing procedure will remain in place. The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) nods: I know that he faces serious specific problems, and I hope that the Bill goes some way towards addressing some of them.

As happens now, the Secretary of State will apply to the court for a disqualification order when he considers that appropriate and in the public interest. The director will remain free to defend the proceedings in court. Nothing has been taken away from his right to defend himself in court if he decides to do so. This could be described as a supplementary vehicle, which can help to cut costs and save time.

The Company Directors Disqualification Act has been in operation for nearly 14 years, and experience has shown that it could benefit from a little attention. We are taking this opportunity to make some technical amendments to improve its clarity, effectiveness and efficiency. Among other things, the Bill will make it clear that disqualification represents an absolute bar on a person acting as an insolvency practitioner. I hope that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome heard that, because I know that he is deeply involved in researching the subject, but in case he did not, I shall read it out again. Among other things, the Bill will make it clear that disqualification represents an absolute bar on a person acting as an insolvency practitioner.

Mr. David Heath: I am grateful to the Minister—although he did not need to read that passage twice,

because I heard it the first time. It does not, however, address the issue that concerns me—the difficulty caused by malpractice on the part of a practitioner in insolvency. It stops someone who has previously been disqualified becoming an insolvency practitioner, but it does not deal with the specific case of which I am thinking. It sounds to me as if the Bill does not cover the area involved, and I look forward to legislation that does.

Dr. Howells: The hon. Gentleman should contact the regulatory body governing the insolvency practitioner concerned, with a view to its investigating. There are numerous means whereby practitioners can be disciplined, as they should be if they are guilty of misdemeanours. We are not entirely the prey of practitioners who may be involved in such activities; means of redress already exist.

Mr. Bercow: Given that there were 270 more disqualification orders in 1999 than there were in 1997, can the Minister give us some indication of how many of those 270 were contested, and how many of the 1,489 in 1999 were contested, so that we can have an idea of the extent of the disputation and of the delay before the granting of the orders?

Dr. Howells: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the figures, but I shall certainly procure them for him.

The bar that will be placed on a person acting as an insolvency practitioner redefines the court to which an application for a disqualification order should be made. It also redefines the court to which an application for permission to act as a director while disqualified should be made. Disqualification orders made in Northern Ireland will be given the same effect in Great Britain as those made here. That will increase the protection provided by disqualification orders.

Let me now deal with the question of reporting offences. When reporting suspicions of criminal misconduct by company directors and members under section 218 of the Insolvency Act, the liquidator in a voluntary winding-up in England and Wales does so to the Director of Public Prosecutions. The DPP can then refer such reports to the Secretary of State for investigation. We think that it would be far more sensible for those reports to be made to the Secretary of State in the first place, and that is what we provide for in the Bill. That will streamline the process and ensure that misconduct is dealt with sooner rather than later.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): The Minister will know that, in certain circumstances, it is difficult to get an accurate fix on true accounting by accountants in order to establish what misconduct the directors have committed. Has he any proposals to enforce the production of accurate accounts within a specified time limit so that the case can be proved?

Dr. Howells: The hon. Gentleman's point is one of the central themes of the decision to institute an independent company law review. It is important that such transparency is at the heart of any changes made to company law. I know very well the grief and difficulty of some of his constituents resulting from apparently creative accounting in a current case. We are looking at the matter carefully.

I do not want to pre-empt the publication of the independent review. That is a major piece of work and will be an important quarry from which we can take material to ensure that such problems are properly addressed in company law.

I return to the reporting of offences. When investigating reports, the Secretary of State can use Companies Acts investigation powers, and section 219 of the Insolvency Act purports to allow answers obtained by use of compulsory powers to be used in evidence. That is clearly contrary to the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Saunders *v.* the United Kingdom, and we are taking the opportunity to put the situation right.

The Administration of Insolvent Estates of Deceased Persons Order came into force at the end of 1986. Broadly, the intention was that all the assets that a debtor owned immediately before his death should be available to satisfy the claims of his creditors in insolvency proceedings started after his death. It was thought that this would include his interest in any jointly owned assets. In this way, the situation in all insolvencies would be the same.

However, a decision in the Court of Appeal in 1994 in the case re Palmer (Deceased) established that the order-making power contained in section 421 of the Insolvency Act did not bring about that result. I need not trouble the House with the details of that case. Suffice it to say that its result is that property of which the debtor was a joint owner passes on his death to the remaining joint owner or owners under supervisorship rules and is not available to his creditors.

Of course, substantial assets may be involved. We do not think it right that creditors' rights can be dependent on the mere chance of whether the debtor is alive or dead when they need to have recourse to him. We are therefore taking the opportunity to address the issue and by doing so, we will, so far as is possible, restore a level playing field and create legal certainty in this area. However, we will introduce amendments to the relevant provision in the Bill because difficulties with the current text need to be addressed.

We propose that clause 11 should be amended so that the trustee of a deceased insolvent's estate should be able to apply to court for an order against the surviving joint owner for the purpose of securing that the debts and liabilities of the estate are met. The court will have discretion to make an order for a sum not exceeding the value lost to the estate.

In England and Wales, it is a requirement that liquidators of companies and trustees in bankruptcy pay funds from the realisation of assets into the insolvency services account—the ISA—at the Bank of England. For many years, the law has allowed funds held in that account on behalf of insolvent companies to be invested in Government securities for the benefit of the estate. In addition, funds of £2,000 or more remaining in the company's account attract interest at the rate of 3.5 per cent. a year. In that way, the company and its creditors and shareholders can receive a benefit from the use of the funds until they are ready to be distributed.

For reasons that are now shrouded in the mists of history, similar provisions have never applied in relation to bankruptcy estate funds. There is clearly an anomaly, which the Bill allows us to remove.

[Dr. Howells]

On cross-border insolvency—the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), who raised the matter, seems to have left the Chamber—

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Briefly.

Dr. Howells: Indeed.

Many businesses operate across national boundaries. That phenomenon is likely to expand considerably in the future, and can give rise to problems when a business fails, because some countries are not always willing to recognise foreign insolvency proceedings. That can make the recovery of assets difficult, and sometimes impossible. The absence of any internationally accepted measures to deal with cross-border insolvencies can make the handling of such cases uncertain, inefficient and often very costly. Clearly, that cannot be in the best interests of the creditors.

In 1997, the United Nations adopted a model law on cross-border insolvency. The United Kingdom played a part in developing that model law, and there is now a concerted push to implement the law in countries such as the United States, South Africa, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but there is a degree of reluctance to act until the intentions of other countries become clear.

The order-making powers contained in the Bill will enable us to implement the model law in this country. We think that that is the best way to proceed. It will give a clear indication of our intentions, and it will mean that that can be done at a more measured pace than would be possible if the detailed measures were included in the Bill. Importantly, it will allow for detailed consideration of what should be done, and for appropriate consultation to take place before the measure is brought back to Parliament for consideration.

We have given careful consideration to the measures in the Bill. The over-arching purpose of them all is to improve confidence in the marketplace. We believe that improved confidence will contribute to the creation of an environment that will encourage enterprise. I am therefore pleased to commend the Bill to the House.

5.57 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I know that you have occasionally shown an interest in the equine world, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not know whether you have ever gone to a horse sale and seen the yearlings going round the sale ring. Occasionally, one can look at a yearling and immediately identify the sire. There are some stallions that have the ability to imprint their characteristics on their foals.

The Bill has all the imprint of a Department of Trade and Industry Bill—the best of intentions out of muddle and confusion. *[Interruption.]* I have sympathy with the Minister, and he may well laugh nervously, but is it sensible for the Bill to be before the House at the same time as the Government are conducting a review of the Insolvency Service, the very service with which the Bill deals?

I know that the Minister tried to explain that away, as he recognises it as a weak point in his argument. Why did not the review start in 1997, so that the Bill could be up to date and deal with the matters arising from that review? One or two questions have already probed the Minister's defence, and we were told that those matters will be dealt with by amendments. The Minister said that amendments would be introduced, and pointed out possible problems with the international scene. The Bill may make the United Kingdom less attractive for business.

Before we even start, the Bill is in trouble. I do not blame the Government for trying to implement a manifesto commitment—all credit to them for doing so.

I remember that when we returned after the general election, and many hon. Members, who are now in opposition, were given more time with our families, the Government rushed forward with a Statutory Right of Interest Bill. It was supposed to solve all small businesses' problems with cash flow and money. However, nothing has happened since. The Bill simply disappeared. There were plans for volunteers and aid for sub-post offices throughout the country. That money remains locked in the toils of the European Union.

You would rightly take me to task, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I went through all the Department of Trade and Industry Bills that failed, and I shall not do that. However, the DTI often provides more spin than substance. How much more spin can we get than that provided by the Government's Small Business Service website, which states:

> Government continues to reduce the burdens on business caused by regulation.

Last year, the Government introduced more regulations than had been introduced in any year of this country's history. They are on track for breaking that record this year.

Flawed and ineffective as the Bill currently is, let us try to make it work. There is only a short time in the spill-over session to try to sort it out. What greater condemnation is there of the Government's legislative programme than that we have to deal with such an important Bill in the spill-over, in a rush to the line to get it done before Parliament is opened for another Session? Ministers should seriously consider their position; the proceedings have been managed appallingly. However, Conservative Members want to attack the problem by trying to be helpful, to make the Bill work and to help our businesses.

We all want businesses that can be saved to be duly rescued. I have some experience of the small business world. I do not know how many DTI Ministers have run a business and had to worry about making it succeed from day to day. I know that it is exceedingly hard to start a business; it takes a year or so to break even, and a further year or so to build up a customer base and start to make money. I also know how easy it is to close down a business at a flick.

I agree with the Minister about the inappropriateness of attempting to introduce a chapter 11 solution in this country at the moment. There is a series of differences between the United Kingdom and the United States, and some are cultural. In the United States, much more equity sharing occurs, and there are many more share options. That is the norm; the process is considered standard. In the United Kingdom, the owner wants to keep everything to himself, and banks have a loan rather than an equity culture. In this country, one can borrow as much money from the bank as one likes as long as one has the assets to back the loan.

The current system for a struggling business is a nightmare. The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), who has now left the Chamber, made a point about the cost of insolvency practitioners. That is part of the problem. Business men and women are reluctant to go to the bank because there is a fair chance of the manager starting insolvency proceedings. The main source of insolvency proceedings is the actions of a bank.

There is another problem. When a creditor calls in an insolvency practitioner, more often than not there is more meat on the bones than there would be if it was simply a matter of keeping the patient alive. For that reason—I say this with all due modesty—I presented a ten-minute Bill in February last year. It tried to divide responsibilities on insolvency, and provided that an insolvency practitioner who recommended that a company be placed in liquidation would not handle the insolvency. That would hopefully lead to a more relaxed, if not independent, view on the matter.

Several instances have been drawn to my attention of companies that could have been saved if their cases had been properly handled. However, it was more profitable and easier to put those companies into insolvency. With such insolvency comes the death of dreams for many business men and women. The Minister should read my ten-minute Bill before we go into Committee, probably next Tuesday. He will then be able to appreciate the realities that face some businesses when they deal with insolvency.

Mr. Bercow: I am especially grateful to my hon. Friend for his confirmation that more than mere bones are required to sustain life in the human body. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in the light of his comments on the dramatically increased regulatory burden under the Government, that it would be helpful—especially if it came from the lips of a typically helpful Minister—if the Government gave an undertaking at this juncture to publish a statement of the annual costs of regulation on British business and of their plans in the ensuing year to reduce that cost?

Mr. Page: My hon. Friend tempts me down a path that I would dearly love to follow. The various bodies that represent businesses in this country show escalating evidence of the price of regulation and the burdens on business. However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you give me a warning glance, and if I were to go into the Government's appalling record in any detail on the regulations that have been heaped on business, you would take me to task. I must therefore pass up my hon. Friend's kind invitation to outline once more the burdens that the Government have placed on our businesses.

I can give my hon. Friend one small crumb of comfort. After the next election, when we introduce our policies, there will be a definite reduction in the number of burdens that have been placed on business. When I made those remarks a year ago, there was a great guffaw of laughter from Labour Members; today there is only a muted titter. It is muted because Labour Members realise that this party is coming back and that we have the policies that this country wants implemented after the general election.

I hope that I shall get unanimous support for my next point. Every hon. Member has experienced constituency cases in which the cost of insolvency practitioners has left little or no money for the creditors. The insolvency practice has changed its name to R3—the Association of Business Recovery Practitioners. I regard that change with some hope that the emphasis in the organisation is starting to be on the recovery of businesses rather than simply on that of creditors' money.

I welcome the main point of the Bill. However, I must register some anxiety about whether it will work in practice. It will mean extra legislation in a year or so. As the Minister has already admitted, the Bill is only a step down the path. I doubt whether the Bill is constructed in such a way as to succeed in returning the wounded to health while not dragging out the lives of the terminally ill, with the consequent reduction of payment to the creditors. We should make no mistake: whoever deals with the case—new-fangled authorised agents or insolvency practitioners—will get their cut first. We must ensure that the system will create real benefit and not simply mean more time, more bureaucracy and more cost.

I have given a general outline of the conditions and problems that face small businesses. Let us consider the specifics of the Bill. The Bill contains several controversial provisions, such as creating a new type of insolvency practitioner who can act as a nominee or supervisor of a voluntary arrangement. It envisages that such a person being authorised by a body, and recognised in turn by the Secretary of State, will satisfy certain security arrangements and requirements and will not be ineligible on certain specified grounds. Those persons need not be licensed insolvency practitioners. There is no need for that to happen because an authorised person would be automatically approved if he was already a licensed insolvency practitioner.

To what extent does a knowledge of insolvency have to be present in order that an individual can qualify to become an authorised person? The Minister started down that route and talked about aspects of the moratorium, both present and future. The new procedure for a moratorium cuts out the role of the court. Under existing law, the company can obtain a moratorium if it petitions the court for an administration order. That is normally heard within four or five days. The court can then continue the moratorium by making an administration order. An individual can obtain a moratorium if an interim order is granted by the court. Again, the court is closely involved at that early stage.

At present, we have an important safeguard. The moratorium imposes extreme restrictions on the creditors, and the court can carefully place the moratoriums. The new proposals dispense with that safeguard. The company or individual will be able to obtain a moratorium without any involvement of a court. Will that be an acceptable safeguard? It is essential that there is public confidence in the integrity and competence of those who will exercise such powers to impose a moratorium on the creditors. I have no doubt that that will be a subject of considerable discussion in Committee.

A further problem arises when a debtor, be it a company or an individual, in financial difficulties seeks the advice of a professional person. In many instances, he may seek the advice of an authorised person. That advice will probably be given free, just as any similar advice is given free by a licensed insolvency practitioner now. It is given free—very few things are free—in the hope and expectation that the person giving the advice will be appointed a nominee, a supervisor, administrator or

[Mr. Page]

liquidator in due course, and will be remunerated for doing so. That remuneration will more than make up for the free advice given earlier.

That is how the system works now with licensed insolvency practitioners. I can think of no reason why that should not be how the system will work with authorised persons in future if the relevant provisions are enacted.

A number of authorised persons will be tempted by the hope and expectation of earning remuneration as a nominee or supervisor in due course. They will want to recommend a moratorium and a voluntary arrangement because that is when they will be paid. If they recommend other procedures such as insolvency, bankruptcy, administration or liquidation, they probably will not be paid. The temptation is therefore a real one, and I believe a great one. It is a temptation that is in direct conflict with the one that faces insolvency practitioners now. Will some of the authorised persons succumb to the temptation? That could be an inevitable consequence of human nature. Is there a real risk that in many instances an authorised person will wrongly advise the debtor to propose a voluntary arrangement because that is the only way in which he will be paid?

Licensed insolvency practitioners may recommend one sort of insolvency procedure instead of another because they are more likely to be appointed as the insolvency holder in due course. That is likely to happen also with authorised practitioners, who will not be paid at all if they recommend insolvency procedures for which they are not qualified. I do not say that that will happen in every case; it may happen in only a few. However, we must not forget that in these instances debtors are particularly vulnerable. When a man or a woman sees his or her company much at risk and likely to go down after perhaps many years of dedication and hard work, it is human nature that he or she is liable to clutch at any straw.

There is the other side of the coin. Am I being unduly cynical to suggest that companies in financial difficulties may well hunt about from authorised person to authorised person until they land on someone who will recommend a moratorium?

The one part of the Bill with which we entirely agree—the Minister will be delighted to hear this—is the amending of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. That will confer a power to accept undertakings of the Secretary of State. We believe that this will be of benefit and of help. We look forward to seeing that part of the Bill pass through Committee sweetly and smoothly.

There is a curiosity in the Bill which I believe will make it difficult to operate. My understanding of the conditions for granting a moratorium is that the nominee of a company should be satisfied by the directors that it is likely to have sufficient funds during the moratorium to carry out its business. I must challenge the Minister to explain why it is envisaged in the Bill that a company that secures a moratorium might need to borrow money to finance operations, and must be in a position to offer security to potential lenders to the benefit of the company with the sanction of the nominee and the supervisor.

There is a difficulty in envisaging a situation in which a corporate lender will make loans available when the directors of the borrowing company must act honestly in the interests of their own company and under the supervision of a nominee, who may not be a qualified insolvency practitioner even though he or she may have the dubious advantage of being anointed by the Secretary of State.

If the lending institution makes an erroneous judgment, a security may be unenforceable. I wonder how many of the creditors, and the banks in particular, will be tempted down that route.

Like the curate's egg, the Bill is good in parts. It will bring modest benefits and they will be welcome. The fundamental issue in insolvency law is being addressed in the consultation process following on from the publication last year of the Insolvency Service review of company rescue and business reconstruction mechanisms. The Bill is only one step down that path. It would have been much better if it had been tied in to the conclusion of that review rather than being part of a piecemeal operation.

6.18 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I welcome the Bill. I realise that it is modest in content and that a review is taking place. I think that we would have complained had we had a modest Bill and no review. We would have complained even more had we had no Bill.

When we look to the United States, we see the success of its economy and its ability to sustain new business growth and to encourage new businesses to be established. In large part, the business community is self-confident enough to support new enterprise. The culture in this country is more concerned about chasing assets than about preserving businesses. It is equally concerned about punishing short-term business failure, rather than seeking to recognise potential entrepreneurial acumen. It is in that light that we should recognise that the Bill is welcome.

We are not talking about changing the fundamental legal structure in one fell swoop. We cannot with one axe hack away the centuries of prejudice which had people being sent to the debtors' prison for business failure. Although there has been an increase in the recognition or identification of criminal elements and directors, the overwhelming majority of businesses go bust through incompetence or bad luck, not through criminal activities. The law should, in its way, take account of that.

We no longer live in Dickensian times, where a Micawberish style of expenditure would result in being sent to prison. Although people, are thankfully, no longer sent to prison for bankruptcies brought about through bad luck or incompetence, they are nevertheless punished in such a way that they are denied the opportunity to start again.

When I talk to people in the United States who are engaged in supporting new businesses, and discuss with venture capitalists how they look at the matter and what they are prepared to do to support new businesses, the conversation quickly moves towards a line that I heard repeatedly on visits to the United States. They often say that they would rather support someone whose business has failed once, although perhaps not two or three times. They do not want serial failures, but they recognise that, if people have had one or two spats, more often than not those spats will result in them being more aware, better educated and better able to address the challenges.

We know that, in the first year, businesses are not just undercapitalised and underfinanced. In most instances, they are frightened of the day they never saw because of

the draconian punishments that are meted out to those who are deemed to have failed or to be near to failure. We could change the law and have innumerable inquiries, but we must try to change the culture in this country and the way in which it inhibits enterprise and holds back not just enterprise but the willingness of people with money to support those who need that resource to get their businesses going.

Last year, the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which I have the honour of chairing, was invited to comment on some of the draft clauses. A rather grudging consultative process was entered into. We had only a few weeks to do it. It was a highly inconvenient time. It had a wee bit of the token about it; the response to some of the points that we made suggested that, but I will not labour that point. However, I will happily wait until after the general election for some thorough reform of insolvency procedures. I hope that it will be within the general company legislation that the next Labour Government are committed to introducing. Like so many of the Government's policies for enterprise and competitiveness, it will be welcomed by the business community.

The ritual ranting about regulation is different from the complaints that we used to hear about the uncertainties of the business cycle, the problems of inflation or the vagaries of interest rate changes. In the past two or three years, we have had exactly the stability that small businesses need to flourish, but they need other things as well.

I take the point about the insolvency profession: it is reminiscent of the Boilermakers Society of days of old. It alone had the means and skills whereby the job could be carried out. It is strange that, when Baroness Thatcher and her colleagues tried to end restrictive practices, they seemed to have a certain blindness when it came to organisations in the business sector. They did not seem to have the same 20:20 vision that they had with the trade union and labour movement, but the fact that we recognise the position of the insolvency profession is welcome. That should be widened, and more suitably qualified individuals should be capable of being involved.

I take the point—it is interesting—that several hon. Members have made about rogue elements within the insolvency profession. There are means whereby they can be dealt with, but it is difficult, in the middle of insolvency, for individuals who are not fulfilling their duties in a proper and fit way to be stopped. I suspect that we shall have to wait for subsequent legislation to deal with that. Nevertheless, we must be helpful.

Some of us were a wee bit surprised that section 218 of the Insolvency Act 1986 has achieved a place in the legislation. Nevertheless, we could look at it. It might have been possible to consider the matter further if we had more time—or if my hon. Friends had more time, because I do not think that I will be able to participate in the Standing Committee, and I am giving no indication of a willingness so to do. I hope that the Whips Office takes due note of that in the weeks that lie ahead. I am pleased that no Whips are in the Chamber at the moment.

Quite early in the life of the Government, the then Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths), said that he hoped that legislation would be introduced. Two years ago, the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, now the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, indicated in his important White Paper that legislation would be forthcoming. Some 14 months later, the Bill saw the light of day.

The Bill started in late February in the House of Lords. It is not that bad that it reached this House by July, but it is unfortunate that there will probably be insufficient time to deal with all its inadequacies. Given the desire for change in the House, it would probably get out of control if we had too much time.

I imagine that, as the Bill will not be unduly controversial, it will be possible for it to be dealt with, but I hope that the Minister will look at the financing of a company voluntary administration. My colleagues on the Select Committee raised concerns about the company and its landlord, its utility suppliers and those who lease it the tools of its trade. We were not satisfied that the Bill, modest though it is, was too narrow to deal with those issues. An opportunity has been lost. I would be doing my colleagues an injustice if I did not raise those matters with the Minister. They should be dealt with with greater urgency.

Let me deal with one small point that came up: the question of deceased debtors. There is a human dimension to the process: matters relating, for example, to the matrimonial home of a deceased debtor and the risk that the title to such homes may be put in doubt by the Bill. We would like clarification. Often, when a business person dies, the spouse imagines that he or she still has the assets of a home but, for whatever reasons, those can be arrested. We could have dealt with that in advance of some wide-ranging inquiry.

As I said earlier, legislation will not resolve the big questions. That will involve a cultural change in our country's business community. However, on some specific issues, where personal and familial problems could be avoided, my hon. Friend the Minister could take the opportunity afforded in Committee to look again. I realise that there are time problems, which are always part of the difficulty.

This is not the single most important piece of company legislation that the House will face in the next few years. It is a modest but important step because it shows the business community that the Government and the Department of Trade and Industry are on the job and are continuing to pursue the wretched business of insolvency in the United Kingdom, the suffering that it causes to families and individual business people and the way it affects the confidence of those who, with a wee bit better luck and a little chance, might have been able to turn their businesses round or keep them going a bit longer—perhaps the extra three months afforded by the moratorium. It might offer them the opportunity to obtain slightly better advice than they have had in the past. Those things will make a difference in a number of instances, and if that can help to remove the stigma of short-term failure from so many of our potential entrepreneurs, it will have gone a long way to helping the business community and enterprise in this country.

6.32 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I thank the Minister for guiding us through some esoteric issues in this extremely specialised area of commercial law. As the Minister rapidly read through his highly technical brief, as a non-lawyer and non-accountant I felt a little like the swimmer from Equatorial Guinea in the Olympic games, struggling desperately to keep afloat.

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

As this is a Second Reading, the appropriate approach, as the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) has already suggested, is to look at the big picture and the big messages that emerge from this specialised and limited piece of legislation. It is essentially about trying to restore the balance between lenders and borrowers and between rentier and entrepreneur. The hon. Member for Ochil referred to the situation in the United States. An interesting study in a recent edition of *Accountancy Age* showed that, of all the major western countries, Britain has the most creditor-friendly regime. By contrast, the United States has the most creditor-unfriendly regime, which is most friendly to equity and shareholders. The United States has stay-on assets for companies in extreme cash-flow difficulties and it is possible for management to remain in decision-making positions and to manage a crisis in a way that is not possible here.

It was clear from his speech just over a year ago that the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, now the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and his right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer were endeavouring to push British legislation in a north Atlantic direction. This Bill is a small step on the way.

I have not had many cases in my constituency, but they all illustrate the big imbalance between lender and borrower in personal and corporate insolvencies and bankruptcies. The lenders are often commercial banks, which have a powerful position in such a situation. They will have a charge on the assets and there will often be a personal guarantee. Their business is highly profitable and secure, which is why the Government have referred their small lending business to the Office of Fair Trading following the Cruickshank report. We often see cases in which the commercial banks are trigger happy and will precipitate an insolvency in a way that a creditor who has much more self-interest with a company will not. We might have a trigger-happy precipitation of a crisis at one end of the chain, leading to thorough, often vindictive, pursuit of assets at the other. If the legislation, through the three-month moratorium, redresses that balance even a little by reducing costs by removing the need for court proceedings, it will have made a useful contribution.

The legislation seems broadly satisfactory, but I want to put a few questions to the Minister. My first question follows a point made by the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on why this limited measure is being introduced in isolation from other inquiries. He mentioned one, which is relevant—the insolvency working party. It is not clear why the findings of that working party are not being assimilated into the legislation and why the legislation cannot wait for that. In addition, an inquiry into bankruptcy law has the important task of determining the difference between crooks and honest business failures. That important distinction is germane to the issue of business disqualification. I am not entirely clear why that inquiry cannot complete its business before the whole of insolvency and bankruptcy law is brought up to date in a consistent way. I agree with the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire that there is a process question to answer.

I want to ask about the international ramifications. The legislation tries to deal with the problem of globalisation of business, such as cross-border lending and cross-border ownership, through encouragement of the model agreements under the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law. That seems to be a sensible approach. I do not fully understand the relationship between the global approach to the harmonisation or reconciliation of different insolvency procedures with the European directive—it is taking place in parallel—that comes into force at the end of 2002. Are the two approaches consistent? Which supersedes which and what is the relationship between them? I do not know the answer. That is an important question if we are talking about the compatibility of regulation.

On the specifics of the Bill, my colleagues in the other place, who are much more knowledgeable about this than I am, have made some particular points, which I shall rehearse for the record. Lord Sharman, who has a good deal of experience as a practitioner, has drawn attention to problems that arise from the issue of nominees. He says that, although it may be desirable to have nominees who are not qualified insolvency practitioners on grounds of cost—that issue has been raised already—there are powerful arguments for involving qualified people. One of their roles is to advise an insolvent company on the variety of business options and it is important that those concerned are properly qualified. There is a pro and a con there.

Lord Razzall made the point that, when we are talking about the disqualification of directors, we are talking about proceedings that are often as much criminal as civil. There is usually a combination of the two. If people are to be disqualified on the grounds of possible criminal activity, the principles of the European convention on human rights begin to apply and a more onerous standard of proof is required. As it was not mentioned in the Minister's introductory remarks, it is important to have clarification from him as to how far that issue has been thought through.

The legislation seems uncontentious and desirable and has our support in principle, but technical issues and possible issues of procedure regarding parallel inquiries need to be answered.

6.39 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): This is a fairly small and simple measure—which makes it even more surprising that the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) has made such heavy weather of it. I could not understand what he was getting at. We can welcome this legislation in its own right because it makes some small improvement in the current situation, and that is to be welcomed.

It has to be pointed out, however, that that improvement is only a minuscule nibble at a major problem that the Government should be tackling. There is a pressing need for proper and effective regulation of accountancy practitioners and for redressing the current odds that favour those who have the money and those who put up the money—particularly the banks—against small businesses which are struggling to survive. The current odds are very unfair and very unreasonable. We need to regulate the affairs of the insolvency practitioners and control their activities so that small businesses are protected rather than used as fee-generating material.

The 1992 Labour party manifesto dealt with the need to redress those odds, and our 1997 business manifesto dealt with the need for independent regulation of

insolvency. Since then, however, we have become very friendly with the business community and those issues have been shelved. We are being presented not with proposals for independent regulation, but with a series of miniature, partial measures—such as this Bill and the shabby Limited Liability Partnerships Act 2000, which we debated some months ago in an equally excitable and crowded House.

Vested interests have played the dominant role in the passage of this type of legislation. The consultations on this Bill have been dominated by the vested interests. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) said, the consultations of the Trade and Industry Committee on the Bill were conducted at break-neck speed—so that there could not be proper consultation. The consultations were also dominated again by the vested interests, such as insolvency practitioners and banks, which earn the fees and at whose mercy small businesses lie.

In reading the report of the debate on the Bill in the other place, I see that those with great names such as Kingsland and Sharman—valiant defenders of the working class and the poor in these matters—made the running and won concessions from the Government. However, the debate is dominated already by vested interests to which a Labour Government should not be making concessions. Now, the Minister tells us that there have been last-minute representations from those vested interests to change the legislation's proposed regulations.

Although small businesses are struggling, and some of them are dying, we seem to want to consult the vultures that are hovering overhead. We seem to prefer a society for the defence of vultures to a society that protects small businesses or stakeholders, such as employees, unions, consumers and suppliers. Stakeholders want to load the odds in favour of the survival of small companies, but they are not being involved in the consultation.

The victims of the vested interests—the small businesses closed down by big money—also were not included in the consultations. Mr. Barry Chapman, managing director of J. S. Bass, of Manchester, provides the classic example of a business being closed down by the insolvency practitioners and the banks working in collusion and using force majeure. Voices such as Mr. Chapman's have not been heard in any of the consultations.

The Bankruptcy Association of Great Britain and Ireland, which is based in Hull, was not consulted in the proceedings. Such consultation was neglected in favour of gimmicks. Although issues such as establishing a rescue culture and tackling rogue directors need to be addressed, they should be addressed within an over-arching regulatory framework and not in minimal measures such as this Bill.

The safeguards that have been provided so far in our minimalist legislation safeguard only vested interests, which we are anxious not to offend greatly. We are particularly anxious not to offend the banks, which have the monstrous advantage of being able to impose a floating charge. Such a charge is unknown in most other systems; it is certainly unknown in the United States. It allows banks to crucify small businesses and to grab back money that they loan for development. Even a change in bank manager can produce an entirely different climate for small businesses. Here we are, however, loading the odds in favour of those types of large institutions, instead of doing something about the major scandals.

Banks have a habit of installing an accountancy firm in a small business, asking it to report on the state of that business, and, subsequently—after the accountancy firm recommends liquidation—giving the insolvency work to the insolvency arm of that same accountancy firm. That is a crying scandal that should have been dealt with. The Royal Bank of Scotland has dealt with it by refusing to give both types of business to one firm, resulting in a reduction not only in the number of liquidations, but in the costs of the overall operation. We should be making that type of provision in this legislation.

We are consulting the vultures and giving them more power, rather than safeguarding the interests of the victim in the desert who is crawling to shade and safety. The victim might make it to safety if the vultures were not being helped in our insolvency vulture culture. We should be helping the victims to survive, but we are only offering them a little piece of Elastoplast.

I should like to deal with a few problems in the legislation. Hon. Members are right to praise provision of an extendable 28-day moratorium. However, why have only 28 days been provided? That is a very short time to allow businesses to put their affairs in order and to make a rescue plan. The United States chapter 11 procedure provides for 90 days, and that makes more sense. We should allow more time.

Additionally, why is that 28-day period provided only for small businesses with fewer than 50 employees? If it is sauce for the small goose, surely it is also sauce for the big gander. Why cannot that protection be extended to medium and large-sized businesses? What is the problem? If we agree that there should be a rescue culture, and that the aim should be to keep the company going, to sustain jobs and to maintain the nexus of stakeholder connections, why is the provision made only for small businesses?

The Minister told us that the provision is better than chapter 11. I do not think it is, for reasons that I shall explain later. However, if it is better than chapter 11, surely it should be extended to medium and large-sized enterprises, which affect many more jobs and the health of many more communities. Perhaps the Minister will tell us how many firms will be saved by the current proposal, and how many would be saved if the provision were extended to medium and large-sized businesses. If the provision is effective, it should be made available to every business.

My preference is for a 90-day provision, as under chapter 11 in the United States, which gives companies such as Chrysler a chance to reorganise and restructure their finances, to get a grip on things and to come through. That is what we should do. We should put the onus on bringing the company through. We have a grabbing insolvency culture, in which people say, "Let's get our hands on the assets and flog them off as much as we can. Let's keep things going as long as we can to get the fees as high as we can." The fees are usually exorbitant. The culture should be entirely the opposite; it should be one of keeping firms going, and chapter 11 provides for that.

As we heard earlier, lawyers have to be paid and chapter 11 is subject to all kinds of constraint, but so is the procedure under the Bill. The new practitioners will have to be paid considerable sums to get the procedure going. Either way, professional assistance and support must be financed, but chapter 11 seems to be more fundamental and better because it changes the whole culture.

[Mr. Austin Mitchell]

The Bill will provide minimal protection, which will neither change attitudes much nor provide generous help to small companies. Chapter 11 changes the culture and places the onus on survival, so why not use chapter 11 provisions for medium and large businesses?

We promised before we came to power to promote a stakeholder culture. We should indeed promote a stakeholder culture, but the employees of small businesses are crucial to such a culture. The employees may or may not be organised in unions, but they should be part of the consultative process to institute the new procedures. Why are they excluded from them? Why is the only interest considered, especially by the banks involved, that of taking the decision for a creditor's voluntary arrangement? That is a matter of vital concern to the employees, both part-time and full-time. Their jobs are affected; they have a vital stake; so why cannot they be consulted?

Employees will be taken into account in the insolvency proceedings because they will become creditors if things do not work out, even if they were not notified of the arrangements. Why cannot they be included in the consultative procedure? The creditors, part-time employees, pieceworkers and subcontractors working from home all need to participate and be specifically recognised in the process. They need specific protection, but the Bill will not give it to them. That is a serious flaw.

The vested interests in the procedure are still too strong. If a company runs into difficulty and its directors think that it is trading while insolvent, they are personally liable for its debts. Therefore, at the first sign of a problem, they will rush to an insolvency practitioner, saying, "What are we going to do?" The practitioner will charge them a fee, thus compounding the problem. He may refer the directors to the new supervisor or nominee provided for in the Bill, who will charge another fee.

The insolvency practitioner who the directors approach is unlikely to be anxious to avoid the opportunity to make money by advising them to use a voluntary arrangement and, subsequently, turning it into an administration, from which he will receive fees. Such scams have been going on for 20 years or more, and I have constantly notified the Department about them, but no action results.

Let us imagine that a company finds itself in difficulty. Significant creditors will come together and the banks will dominate the proceedings. It is likely that the banks will not agree to a voluntary arrangement unless they first receive a report from an accountant. As now, they will want to see an accountant's report. Therefore, rather than giving a clean bill of health, the accountant will have a vested interest to get subsequent work for his firm. He will suggest that if a company has problems, it should consider a voluntary arrangement, which involves fees, or that it should be put into liquidation, which will provide more fees for his firm. Vested interests are still involved.

We have not dealt with the problem of restraining the vested interests and requiring that those people in a firm who provide accountancy advice should not deal with the voluntary arrangement or the insolvency if a company goes into liquidation. There is a definite pressure on those people to recommend a certain course of action and that their firm should carry out the work.

I have corresponded for a long period with the hapless, pathetic regulators in insolvency and with the DTI about the J.S. Bass case in Manchester. In that case, there was clearly a ramp between Barclays bank and Ernst and Whinney—subsequently Ernst and Young—which was put in to write the report, recommend liquidation, grab the fees and liquidate the company, even though its assets were substantially greater than its debts, so putting it out of business. That firm was bigger than one with 50 employees as referred to in the Bill, so it would not benefit from such arrangements. However, pressures to do what was done in that case still exist and remain unregulated, which will affect the voluntary arrangements, too. We shall not provide effective protection unless we regulate and remove that anomaly so that those who carry out the investigation should not be involved in the other arrangements.

Will the nominee or supervisor—the man who will handle the turning around of a company—have a duty of care and, if so, to whom will it be owed? Will it be owed to the individual creditors or a creditor, perhaps the bank, or to the creditors collectively? Will it be owed to individual shareholders, to shareholders collectively, or to other stakeholders?

The Minister made an important point. I had better call him my hon. Friend; I have every confidence in him as a Minister and he makes the points very well. However, he is effectively expanding a state guaranteed market. The insolvency practitioners will have a monopoly; they will have a state guarantee.

An answer to a parliamentary question that I tabled states that there are only 1,800 licensed practitioners, of whom 1,270 are currently taking appointments. That is a very small number of insolvency practitioners. There is a pressing need to regulate them, as well as adding to their number under the Bill. Regulation should ensure that practitioners publish meaningful information about their affairs, as should the new nominees. What is their record on saving businesses and rescuing jobs? What fees do they charge? Such information should be in the public domain so that a company in difficulty, which is considering bringing in a nominee and submitting itself to a voluntary arrangement, knows who to turn to for help, what support is available and what the fees will be. What information will be published? The public must be aware of such matters.

If the advice and support service is to be restricted to small firms only, why cannot the DTI provide it? Why must it be provided by another group of practitioners? Why cannot there be fair competition from the public sector? Those involved will be subject to professional regulation, but it will not extend to fees. The Association for Accountancy and Business Affairs has published a series of examples of that. I recommend to the Minister our exciting publication entitled, "Insolvent Abuse: Regulating the Insolvency Industry", which shows that the fees charged go as high as £500 an hour. That is not peanuts. When will such huge charges be regulated? They have a crucial effect on a small firm's ability to survive.

When will the insolvency profession be regulated effectively? My hon. Friend has said that a new regulator will be appointed. At present, 1,800 practitioners are regulated by eight professional bodies, and the Department of Trade and Industry. I argue that that structure should be simplified to one independent regulator, but the Government propose to add another,

non-independent, regulator at the apex of the structure. That regulator will not have the power to deal with individual cases and complaint investigation procedures, and there will not be the ombudsman necessary for effective appeals. The need for an effective appeals machinery, for effective redress and the control of fees, is even more acute for small businesses. The Bill gives small businesses additional help towards survival, but we should regulate the insolvency profession at the same time. The culture in that profession is to grab the fees, and to make them as high as possible.

It is important to regulate insolvency practitioners. Voluntary arrangements have been in place since 1986. My hon. Friend gave the House figures that show that such arrangements are rarely invoked. In 1998, 11,771 companies were wound up, of which only 470 went into a voluntary arrangement. That shows, tellingly, that the provision made in 1986 is not much used.

My hon. Friend hopes that the Bill will cause that provision to be used more widely, and so do I, but is the provision little used because people are scared of the insolvency profession and the fees that are charged? Are they worried that they will not receive reasonable and fair treatment? There is no right of appeal about the treatment that they receive and no way to contest the fees that are imposed. Is it not possible that people are put off entering voluntary arrangements more by such factors than by the difficulties that the Bill is designed to ease? I believe that the central problems are the scale of fees and the lack of regulation.

In conclusion, I am worried that the Bill and its fast-track disqualification procedures will conflict with the human rights legislation to which we now are subject.

Dr. Howells: I am pleased that my hon. Friend has raised the vexed question of human rights. However, I can assure him that the Department has studied the matter in depth, and we believe that the Bill is compatible with the European convention on human rights.

Mr. Mitchell: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I hope that that is the case, but the new procedure makes the Department of Trade and Industry investigator, judge, jury and deal maker in the agreements under which wealthy directors will disqualify themselves. The Bill does not say that the Secretary of State will have to publish a full transcript of any deal struck with such directors. In fact, the convictions in this country of the directors involved in the Guinness affair have been overturned recently by the European Court on the ground that they contravened the convention on human rights in ways similar to those I have described this evening. I am worried about passing a Bill that could be stymied and rendered unenforceable by the appeals that could be generated.

The Bill is a little mouse of a measure. It is welcome—I love small animals. It will bring about an incremental change, but it will not change the insolvency industry's culture, which is loaded far too heavily against small firms and small entrepreneurs, and against survival and in favour of safeguarding the banks and grabbing company assets.

The Bill misses an opportunity in that respect. My hon. Friend accused me, in connection with the Limited Liability Partnerships Bill, of trying to regulate through legislation. However, that would not be necessary if the Department of Trade and Industry were to do its job and impose a proper framework of regulation on this benighted industry.

7.6 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell). When I worked for Ernst and Young, partners in that firm made it clear that the hon. Gentleman was held in great esteem. There was respect, if not reverence, for his views and for his ability to get publicity for them in the accountancy press.

I hope that the Minister will respond to one of the questions that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby asked. Why is the Bill not being extended to cover medium-sized and large businesses? One of the rationales for introducing the Bill is that it will save jobs. Only 0.5 per cent. of all businesses have more than 100 employees, but the businesses excluded from the terms of the Bill account for about 55.7 per cent. of business turnover in the United Kingdom, and employ 48.8 per cent. of those employed in this country.

Extending the provisions of the Bill to larger companies would have a very considerable impact. As the hon. Gentleman has outlined, it might be more realistic to apply them to larger businesses than to very small ones. I am grateful to the Federation of Small Businesses for the data on the proportion of people employed in businesses that are much larger than those specified in the Bill as small businesses.

I support what my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) said about the Bill being considered so late in the parliamentary Session. It need not have happened that way. In appendix 7 on page 58 of the second report from the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, the evidence given on 20 October 1999 by the permanent secretary at the Department is printed. Trying to justify the fact that there had been a minimum period of consultation and a very small number of consultees, he said:

> You will know from the copy consultation letter sent to the Committee that it is Ministers' hope to be able to introduce an Insolvency Bill at a relatively early stage in the 1999–2000 session of Parliament.

The Bill was included in the Queen's Speech of 17 November 1999, but it was not introduced into the other place until 3 February this year. The Bill received its Second Reading on 4 April, and was considered by a Committee of the whole House for one day on 15 June. The Report stage took place on 3 July, and Third Reading on 26 July.

The Minister was right to be rather defensive when he began his remarks by referring to the pertinent observations of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) in yesterday's debate. The right hon. Gentleman memorably said that perhaps this should be called the Bankruptcy Bill [*Commons*] rather than the Insolvency Bill *[Lords]*. His point was that we should be more inclined to hold the Executive to account for the waste of legislative time, which is precious indeed.

This is an example of the Government saying that they will legislate at speed but instead legislating very slowly and delaying the consultation process. Then, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, after a 12-week recess, the

[Mr. Christopher Chope]

first full day's debate must be given over to this Bill which, although everyone accepts it is important, is not the most important issue facing the country. Yet we have to spend Tuesday debating it because the Committee of Selection meets on Wednesday, and if the Bill is not given a Second Reading before then, the Committee will not be able to decide on the membership of the Standing Committee to meet next week. For the Government to have created a situation in which this House has to debate the least important legislation at the very beginning of the spill-over Session is an indictment of the Executive. We should not allow it to happen again and it should certainly not go unremarked by the House. I therefore agree with the right hon. Gentleman's remarks.

The Minister has told us that the legislation is proceeding ahead of decisions on two broader reviews, initiated by the Government, on company rescue and personal bankruptcy. It is a pity that the Government seem to be the author of the delay that has resulted in this piecemeal legislation. Let me illustrate my point.

In December 1998, when the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), was Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, he launched the competitiveness White Paper. He announced reviews into company rescue and the stigma of bankruptcy. Under that White Paper implementation plan, the idea was that the company rescue review would be completed by July 1999. If it had been, the results could have been fed in to the legislation. Needless to say, it was not completed by July 1999, and the resulting delays mean that the results of the review are not available.

On the reform of bankruptcy law, the same White Paper in December 1998 announced by the Secretary of State was re-announced on 2 February 1999. He said that the review would report to him by the end of April 1999. Officials did, indeed, report to Ministers by the end of April 1999. The Secretary of State took rather a long time to consider their views—he did not make an announcement until 2 July. In other words, it took him the whole of May and June to decide what to do in the light of a review which had itself taken only two months.

The right hon. Gentleman then announced that there would be further consultation. The announcement was made at a big event at which the right hon. Gentleman was obviously short of other things to say. He was giving a speech to a joint United States embassy, Department of Trade and Industry and Treasury conference on "Fostering Enterprise—the American Experience". He said:

> I now plan to consult on this proposal and on the possibility of differentiating between bankrupts who have been simply unfortunate and those who are guilty of unacceptable behaviour.

Fine—but then what happened? We had to wait until 7 April 2000 before he actually issued his consultation document—a further nine-month delay.

The consultation paper was then issued, setting out five options. Consultees were required to respond by 30 June, which they did, yet their responses are apparently still being analysed—or, if they have now been analysed by the Insolvency Service and the information has been given to the current Secretary of State, he has not yet thought fit to divulge the results to the House.

It is vital that we have the benefit of the outcome of that much-delayed consultation to inform the Committee's proceedings on the Bill. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us that the information and documentation will be made available to members of the Committee so that they can use it to inform their detailed scrutiny of the Bill in Committee.

I fear that the whole exercise has been designed to ensure that the results of the consultation are not available until after the legislation has been passed so that the Government can then say that it is too late and nothing can be done. However, the Government have said that they wish to legislate—although they had the opportunity to do so in this Session and wasted it. As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby said, we now have this mouse of a Bill. What a way to run a Government and what a way to treat this legislature—this mother of Parliaments. The problem is that the Government are obsessed with soundbites and do not get down to the substance.

I am concerned about a couple of elements in the Bill. In an intervention, I asked the Minister about directors who undertook to accept a disqualification for whatever period and whether there would be any basis for other people to know the facts underlying those undertakings. If a disqualification takes place, particularly if it does not happen in a court, it is important for outside and third parties to have access to the information on the basis of which the decision was reached. This will be important if a director subsequently applies to have his undertaking altered. For example, having undertaken to be disqualified for five years, he could, after two or three years, ask to be relieved of his undertaking and have the disqualification lifted straight away. The people dealing with the arrangements will need to know the basis and the facts on which the director accepted the undertaking in the first place.

I have an acquaintance who was the subject of proceedings under the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. There were implications for him from the consequences of the professional disciplinary hearings that followed. He had a big argument with his professional body because there was no basis on which to agree on the facts on which the disqualification had been based. The abbreviated procedure before the courts had been used in that instance.

It is vital and in the public interest that there should be an agreed statement of facts, behind which the director cannot go subsequently, so that comparisons can be made between the agreed statement of facts in one case and another. We are talking about a very wide discretion being given to allow disqualifications by undertaking lasting from anything between two and 15 years. It is not as if case law can be studied, so how are people to know what the benchmark is for a disqualification for a period of two, three, five or 15 years?

It should not be possible for a director to accept an undertaking to be disqualified for a period of as long as 15 years for a serious offence. Similarly, if people are caught speeding on our roads, they might receive a fixed penalty notice, but the police and prosecuting authorities have the discretion to bring the matter before a court if they think it is sufficiently serious. If an offence is sufficiently serious to warrant a 15-year disqualification, or even a five-year disqualification, surely it should be brought before the courts and be open to public scrutiny.

The Select Committee made that point in its inquiry. It came up with a concise recommendation, on which the

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Government then commented, saying that they were not convinced of the Select Committee's argument. In paragraph 41 of its report the Select Committee said:

> We consider that there could usefully be explicit provision for a statement of fact on which the undertaking was based to be available to the court in the event of subsequent proceedings.

In their response the Government said:

> We note the Committee's views and understand its concerns. We are mindful, however, of the danger of placing too much emphasis on the form of the procedure (statement of unfitted conduct) rather than on the substance of the underlying legislation (early provision of the protection for business and for the public generally which the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 is intended to provide).

I am sure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that in your wisdom you immediately understand the Government's reasoning. However, the members and Clerk of the Select Committee found the Government's response or justification obscure in the extreme, which relates to the obtuse reply that the Minister gave me earlier. I hope that in Committee the Minister will introduce into the Bill a provision that will permit an agreed statement of fact to underlie the acceptance of undertakings for disqualification, which will introduce a degree of transparency important to this process.

I also wish to express solidarity with the Institute of Directors, which is concerned that undue pressure may be put on directors to accept undertakings rather than go to court, and says:

> We agree that the option of disqualification undertakings should be introduced. However, it will be very important that directors offered the option of an undertaking are not under any pressure to take it, rather than going to court. It would not be healthy for a plea-bargaining culture to develop, on the lines of "Accept a three-year disqualification undertaking, or go to court where we will press for five years".

The institute's concern is genuine and, to avoid such danger it suggests that

> procedures governing the way in which the option of an undertaking is brought up and discussed with a director need to be developed and published.

The institute continues:

> There may be much to be learnt here from the Inland Revenue's procedures under which people caught evading tax are offered the option of an informal financial settlement.

The criteria that apply to whether someone should be disqualified for two, five or 15 years should be made open to all so that a director facing disqualification who is negotiating on his own behalf has access to information that otherwise might not be available. It could be oppressive for him to argue against the authorities, who could say that he might get a much higher sentence if he does not accept the position and goes to court. The Institute of Directors makes a good point, and I hope that the Minister will respond to it.

I deal now with the financial effects of the Bill. More than once in his opening remarks, the Minister said that savings in time and money would result from the accelerated disqualification procedure. However, according to the explanatory notes to the Bill, there are no beneficial financial effects, which leads to concern about whether the savings that the Minister used to justify the procedure will take place. Indeed, the explanatory notes justify the procedures relating to directors on the basis that that will speed up the process and do not state that there will be a saving. Will the Minister explain a conundrum? Surely, if fewer cases are referred to the court and each case takes less time, savings will result from that accelerated disqualification procedure. If there are not going to be savings, why is the House being asked to rush the Bill through?

Finally, although some people may feel that these changes will be beneficial, a much larger body of consumers will be concerned about rogues who do not operate within the protection of a company framework. Tomorrow, the hon. Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) will ask for leave to introduce a Bill on rogue traders under the ten-minute rule motion. Our constituents are genuinely concerned about rogue traders who are not incorporated. The Government are introducing piecemeal legislation and I expect them to confirm that they will not be able to introduce legislation on consumer affairs in the coming Session, as they originally forecast. The result of misuse and waste of parliamentary time is that issues relating to rogue traders who are not incorporated will not be the subject of legislation in this Session or, indeed, during the course of this Parliament, which is to be regretted.

7.27 pm

Mr. Page: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I began my earlier contribution to this debate by speculating on the equine parentage of the Bill. You were not in the Chair then, and did not have the privilege of hearing my introduction, but many right hon. and hon. Members know that I have an interest in the horse-racing industry. Having listened carefully to the Minister's arguments and hon. Members' comments, I have no doubt that the Bill reflects sound ideas and good intentions. However, I am not fully convinced of its chances of remedying the problems that it aims to address. It seems less of a thoroughbred than I would have hoped and more of a slightly battered carthorse.

Dr. Howells: Is that me or the Bill?

Mr. Page: The Minister can relax, as I shall come to him in a moment or two.

Generally, the Opposition welcome the Bill, with the proviso that we shall try to improve it in Committee. I very much welcome the observations of the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), who said that, unavoidably, he has to go away. I took great pleasure in his railing against the closed shop of insolvency practitioners. There is great joy in heaven over a sinner who repenteth. I accept the hon. Gentleman's reservation that, if we are going to open up that closed shop, we must make sure that the authorised person is qualified to undertake the work.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) very much agreed with me that the review processes should have taken place before the Bill was introduced. I believe that the House generally is of that opinion.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) started loyally by saying that he could not understand any of my doubts about the Bill, but spent the next 20 minutes outlining his own doubts and worries about how it would work, and if it would work at all. I share many of the hon. Gentleman's concerns, and he can do no harm in my eyes since he has endorsed the principle of my ten-minute Bill under which the role of the insolvency practitioner in recommending administrative receivership should be

[Mr. Page]

taken away from those asked to undertake that receivership. The situation is similar to having a judge and jury who would be paid £10 for letting a defendant off but £100 for finding the accused guilty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), having heard the rumour that there will be no Department of Trade and Industry Bills in the forthcoming Queen's Speech, outlined in his efficient and effective manner the chaos of the Government's timetable management. His every word was a hammer blow against the incompetence and inefficiency that the DTI displayed in handling its affairs this year. Normally, I would blame the Minister for that, but he is just the fall guy. The Secretary of State should have taken a grip to prevent the year of confusion that the DTI has gone through. I shall not spend the time of the House going through the various Bills that had to be curtailed or cut in half or the record number of amendments that had to be tabled, as that would take me out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

My hon. Friend was right to discuss the principles involved in the process of disqualification of a director. They must be clearly understood, and we look to the Minister to expand on what is written in the Bill and to tell us exactly how it will work to prevent future problems.

One of the Bill's basic problems is that it fails fully to reflect the realities of the business world. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby touched on much of that problem. It is all very well to place a moratorium on the shoulders of a small company facing difficulties. The merits of requiring it to seek the views of an insolvency practitioner on the practicality of proposals for a voluntary agreement with creditors have been rehearsed in the other place, and by me and others today.

Any creditor of sense will approve arrangements that will ensure the payment of what is owed. I do not dispute that. In real life, however, the slightest hint that a small company is in trouble and may be unable to meet its obligations will almost certainly cause banks or trade creditors to act before the firm's directors can even begin to seek a moratorium. I hope that I am wrong, but I fear that the Bill may prove counter-productive. Often, only the threat that creditors will lose everything allows companies in trouble to recover, as I know from my business experience. However, banks, which are so often the instigators of proceedings, are also often in a protected position, and are therefore released from that pressure.

I am greatly concerned about the Government's apparent belief—contained in the words of Lord McIntosh in the other place—that the directors of a small company should remain in control of the company and its business during the moratorium.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 4 April 2000; Vol. 611, c. 1249.]

That is hardly compatible with the powers to monitor the company's activities which are to be granted to nominees during the moratorium, or with extensive restrictions on the capacity of such companies to enter into market contracts. We all know the difficulties that will be placed on a small business that is trying to operate during a moratorium and trying to gain money to buy and sell stock.

It is not surprising that the Minister takes such a relaxed attitude towards allowing the decisions of a nominee to be challenged in the courts by the creditors, directors or members of a company or any other persons who are affected by the moratorium. Whether we like it or not, such a provision is a standing invitation for aggrieved parties to hamstring the aims of the Bill. Nominees are unlikely to be willing to place themselves in situations in which their decisions might be subject to such challenges. Exactly what supervisors and nominees would gain from the new procedures envisaged in the Bill remains to be explained.

These practical issues must be explored in Committee. The Conservatives will seek more convincing arguments than have come from the other place or, dare I say it, from the Minister today. We shall, however, go into Committee willingly and positively, and try to make the Bill work. We shall do what we can to help small businesses to survive and live longer in a difficult world.

7.35 pm

Dr. Howells: I thank the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that the Minister would wish to seek the leave of the House if he wants to speak a second time.

Dr. Howells: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to reply to some of the points raised. I am afraid that the new regime seems to have gone to my head.

I welcome the partial support offered by the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire, but I am at a loss to understand why the Government are being pressed to hold off. For years, we have been urged to provide for a moratorium in the company voluntary arrangement procedure, and we have been told that that is necessary to make the procedure more effective. Yet the moment that we act to put the first building block in place, we find ourselves urged not to act, but to delay so that there can be time for further consideration. Where does that leave companies that need a breathing space now? Are they to be allowed to go under because the Bill is not sufficiently elegant to draw entirely on the two reviews mentioned by the hon. Gentleman?

Mr. Page: The Minister is, if I may put it delicately, being disingenuous. He well knows that the complaint that we are making against the Government is that the reviews were not started earlier so that they could have been combined with the Bill. No one wants to hold the Bill up. Indeed, I am complaining that it was not enacted with greater expedition and much sooner.

Dr. Howells: I accept that there has been some congestion, and that it has been caused mostly by DTI Bills: I know, because I have presented most of them. However, I am staggered to hear the Opposition react as they have. Much of what we are doing is based on a draft Bill drawn up by the Conservative Government of the mid-1990s. For whatever reason—no time or no political will—they could not get their act together to put the Bill on to the statute book. We are trying to enact, but we are hearing grudging delaying tactics from the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope). It was pretty rich of him to talk about delays when it was all I could do to stay awake

as he went through his catalogue of imagined delays that he presumed the Government to be applying on purpose. That is, of course, complete nonsense.

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Howells: No.

The consultation paper, "Bankruptcy: A Fresh Start", touches on individual voluntary arrangements under the Insolvency Act 1986. Again, however, its scope is much broader than that limited area. I admit that we are a long way from reaching conclusions on those matters, but the changes that we propose through the Bill to the individual voluntary arrangement procedure are needed now if we are to make it more efficient and effective.

The Bill includes proposals on other important matters, all of which have received a broad measure of support both in and out of Parliament. Those issues are needed now, not at some indeterminate time in future. I hope that we shall hear no more suggestions that the Bill should be delayed.

Unfortunately, because of lengthy speeches—by me as well as by the hon. Member for Christchurch—some prime contributors to this debate have left the Chamber, for unavoidable reasons.

I welcome the important contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), which was the only one to set the issue in a broader context. He reminded us that we should have a different attitude towards honest business failure, which should not carry the stigma that it so often does. The Unites States has a different attitude—that that experience goes under the belt of the business man or woman who suffered it. It is often seen as an asset.

My hon. Friend also mentioned—as did others—the time allowed for consultation. There is no question about the fact that we were pushed for time. I will not try to excuse it. We tried hard to consult as widely as we could. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), who is also pressed for time, let me say that we talked to some of the "victims"—as he put it—as well as the vested interests that he also mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil was concerned, as was the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire, with the important matter of how to prevent a landlord or a utility company closing in during a moratorium on a company. Paragraphs 5 to 12 of schedule 1 make consequential amendments to the Insolvency Act 1986. For example, the amendments to section 233 will not permit suppliers of gas, water and electricity to require a nominee to pay outstanding debts for supply as a condition of supply during the moratorium. I hope that that is helpful.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) is present on the Liberal Democrat Benches because his hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) made a constructive contribution. He asked about international issues, which are difficult. The UNCITRAL measures—I cannot think of another way of pronouncing that hideous acronym—cannot apply if the European Community regulation applies. The hon. Gentleman asked whether the power would impact on the EC regulation on insolvency proceedings. I hope that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington will tell him that the answer is no. Where the EC regulation applies, it will do so to the exclusion of any other provision. That EC regulation comes into force on 31 May 2002.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby, who has now left the Chamber—he was here when I looked round just now—warned us not to be lured on to the rocks by the siren voices of vested interests. He repeated some of the criticisms about the restricted nature of the consultation process. As I have said, there has been extensive consultation. Much of what my hon. Friend had to say went beyond the measures in the Bill. You were right, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to let him run with that theme, which I have heard a number of times. It is a healthy route for him to follow. We sometimes need to be reminded that some powerful vested interests might be strengthened by aspects of the Bill if it were not drafted so expertly.

The hon. Member for Christchurch seemed to do his level best to add to the delay—which may or may not have taken place—in the process of this legislation. However, his argument about introducing transparency into the disqualification undertaking is important. I told him that I would try to answer some of his questions. He seems more concerned with form than substance. The purpose of the disqualification process is to get the director out of the corporate sphere as quickly as possible. That is what concerns me most. The hon. Gentleman questioned how we can guarantee that costs will be less, which is an interesting issue. That is substantially a matter not for the Department but for the courts and defendants. However, I shall try to supply him with up-to-date figures on impact assessment before the Bill goes into Standing Committee—I hope that he will be a member of that Committee because he inevitably graces such Committees with his erudite comments and criticisms.

The intention is that the case against each director will be prepared up to the point at which proceedings could be issued. At that juncture, the Secretary of State will contact the director concerned, who will be invited to say whether he wishes to consent to a specified period of disqualification by way of giving an undertaking. The intention is not to pressurise. If a director does not take up that opportunity, proceedings will be issued in the normal way. It will remain for the director to decide whether he wants to contest the disqualification application in the courts.

Mr. Chope: Will the length of the disqualification period be subject to negotiation or on a take-it-or-leave-it basis?

Dr. Howells: That gives rise to the question whether there should be a schedule of unfitted conduct. Would it be a precondition of a disqualification undertaking and how long might it be? I think that a schedule of unfitted conduct would not be a precondition, but as a matter of practice the Secretary of State would agree the unfitted conduct before accepting an undertaking in accordance with practice post the Woolf civil justice procedure reforms. However, for a variety of reasons, that might not always be possible. For the Secretary of State only to be able to accept an undertaking in cases when a schedule has been agreed would be unduly restrictive and could delay putting in place the protection that the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 is intended to provide. It might also increase costs if there is a difficulty in agreeing to a schedule.

[Dr. Howells]

I hope that I have answered most of the questions. I have no doubt that we can explore them further in Committee. On the basis of what I have said, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

NON-SITTING FRIDAYS

Resolved,

That the House shall not sit on Friday 27th October and Friday 3rd November, and the provisions of paragraphs (3) and (4) of Standing Order No. 12 (House not to sit on certain Fridays) shall apply to those days.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Orchard Hill

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

7.48 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important matter and will briefly outline the services that are on offer at Orchard Hill in case the Minister is not familiar with the establishment.

Orchard Hill is a campus-style hospital run by the South West London Community NHS trust for people with learning disabilities. It is one of two remaining sites in London for such people. It has a 47-acre site in Carshalton next to the site of the old Queen Mary's hospital for children, which closed some years ago. At present, it is home to about 110 people, most of whom have lived there for all their adult life. The people at Orchard Hill tend to have greater disabilities than most—many have mobility problems or are incontinent, some are blind and most require nursing assistance. The majority are over 30 and nearly 90 per cent. have been at Orchard Hill more than 20 years.

As well as being a place where people live and are supported by trained staff, the hospital site has other facilities for people with learning disabilities, not all of which are managed by the trust. For instance, they include short-term, in-patient beds for the assessment, treatment and respite care of people with learning disabilities. There is a further education service, providing a wide range of courses; there is a structured curriculum, with the flexibility to meet individual needs—including communication, physical education and life skills—and specialist courses for students with sensory impairments as well as courses on the arts and sciences.

Orchard Hill can be classed as a unique college for people with learning disabilities. Also on site, there are day services and an experience park. There is a dedicated health centre and a hydrotherapy pool. Some of those services are used by people from the wider community.

There are, however, some difficulties. The campus is old-fashioned and, by contemporary standards, the buildings offer poor accommodation for the services provided. Residents lack both privacy and homely environments. Although some residents' families consider the care provided as adequate, others consider that the service reflects the running down of Orchard Hill. The Minister will agree that that matter needs to be addressed.

In 1999, a consultation document was produced on services at Orchard Hill for people with a learning disability. Orchard Hill was under threat of closure. Worried parents took the matter to a judicial review and the decision on Orchard Hill was quashed by Mr. Justice Jackson. It is likely, however, that the South West London Community NHS trust will introduce similar proposals, taking into account the criticisms made by Mr. Justice Jackson. It is for that reason that I requested the debate. For the sake of residents at Orchard Hill and their relatives, it is essential that any further plans to make changes are carried out correctly and appropriately by the trust.

I seek reassurance from the Minister that plans will proceed in the manner that will—most important—identify and meet the medical, social and sensory needs

of each individual, confirming whether, in fact, they need a medical or a non-medical model of care; assess the psychological impact of moving; minimise the anxiety of relatives; improve current standards of care; and provide a relevant service for the future. The Minister will no doubt agree that we have progressed from Victorian policies for the care and treatment of people with learning disabilities that centred on the use of large institutions.

The most recent guidance for people with learning disabilities is contained in "Signposts for success in commissioning and providing health services for people with learning disabilities", published by the Department of Health in 1998. Orchard Hill can meet many of the recommendations set out in that document. An exception, however, is the recommendation that people with learning disabilities should ideally have experience of community services that are not institutional in style.

Why has the South West London Community NHS trust proposed changes for Orchard Hill? In part, no doubt, it is in response to Government policy. However, many other reasons for change are put forward.

Without a major source of capital investment, the viability of the site will increasingly be challenged; it would be unacceptable for residents to remain on a site that was in permanent decline. Change is happening anyway, because the population at Orchard Hill is an ageing one. People are discharged at the request of a relative or of health authorities and, sadly, several residents have died.

As the cost per capita rises, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain quality. The hospital site is mostly made up of older buildings. That is not an appropriate environment in which to provide care and many professionals are reluctant to work in such settings.

Of course, the new generation of people with learning disabilities expects that services will be more community based and less institutional in style. All national health service bodies have a duty to seek services that make the best use of limited resources.

In 1998, a project board was set up to look at the options for change at Orchard Hill. It soon became clear that a single model would not be practical. A proposal was made to minimise the disruption to clients with the highest need by retaining some existing bungalows while offering new opportunities to the more able residents by creating some new residential services. It was proposed to use land already owned by the trust and to use the independent sector to offer places to the majority of residents. It was thought that such an approach could be more easily tailored to fit individual needs.

The response of relatives to the proposals was generally negative. A third were opposed to the proposed changes. A third said that they might support them if the final arrangements were suitable for the individuals concerned. A third were undecided. Apparently, only one person supported the plans, while 68 per cent. of the next of kin felt that the changes presented no opportunities for residents.

Why was the response so negative? There are several reasons. Next of kin are concerned that the plans will result in the loss of staff who have intimate knowledge of the residents. Most were concerned about the location of future homes, especially as some residents will become the responsibility of the health authority that originally placed them at Orchard Hill. Next of kin were worried that individual placements might not meet the needs of individuals and that monitoring of the independent sector might be deficient. The consultation process carried out by the trust did not appear to address those concerns. That needs to be corrected in future reviews.

It should not be forgotten that the people at Orchard Hill are severely disabled; the majority have a mental age of between two and five. The site benefits from its surroundings of wide open spaces—a fact that I can vouch for, having visited it on many occasions—and from the safe environment in which people who are hyperactive can release energy and walk safely. Relatives are concerned that those important benefits will be lost—to the detriment of the residents.

At the judicial review, Mr. Justice Jackson quashed the consultation process because of a flaw in the decision-making procedures; the health authority had not taken into account the promise made to so many residents that Orchard Hill was a "home for life". Although I realise that a public authority cannot be expected to keep all the promises of its predecessors when considering actions that would take the opposite direction to such promises, they must still be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the process was deeply flawed because the trust had neglected to carry out individual assessments of need.

Mr. Justice Jackson questioned the backbone of the plans for change when he queried whether

> institutionalisation is the real problem for these particular individuals.

That is a worrying observation and undermines one of the trust's major reasons for undertaking the project.

For ageing parents of residents, many of whom have contacted me, their sense of security for the future has been shaken. Any future plans must proceed sensitively and appropriately. Given that, in the past, the trust has shown a serious operational deficit, and bearing in mind the Government's calls for care in the community, there is an impression that change is being driven by a cost-cutting exercise and a top-down agenda for the future of learning disability services nationally and by the reconfiguration of all such services locally. I should like to see evidence that change is being driven by all that is in the best interests of users, patients and the general public.

During the Orchard Hill project, one of the proposals considered was for a care village environment. The situation at Orchard Hill almost fits such criteria already. However, the team considering the proposals did not believe that Orchard Hill adhered entirely to the Government's policy of care in the community. The team was concerned that a ghetto might be created and that the services provided in the village and in other mainstream facilities raised issues of access and integration. However, I question whether the care village proposal was given sufficient consideration.

As the Minister may be aware, Baroness Caroline Cox and Lord Malcolm Pearson recently published "Made to Care: The Case for Residential and Village Communities for People with a Mental Handicap". The paper states that the policy of integration was associated

> with the swing of another pendulum away from a "medical model" of care towards a model of "social care" based on the assumption that most mentally handicapped people are not ill, but have largely "social needs".
>
> That swing has obscured the fact that the health needs of people with mental handicap tend to be greater than those of the general population. Many suffer from multiple handicaps, which need medical care and clinical expertise.

[Mr. Tom Brake]

Baroness Cox acknowledges that, although a move into the community has been successful for many people—because they have gained independence, autonomy, dignity and self-esteem—it does not mean that de-institutionalisation is the most appropriate or suitable option for everyone.

Initially, those who have been discharged from long-stay institutions have been the people who have been the least disabled and the most independent. Now it is likely to be those who are severely disabled and who require a more complex pattern of care.

Are village communities a viable option? I believe that they are. They can provide humane individualised care and offer many advantages. Continuous nursing care can be provided most appropriately in such communities. It is important to bear in mind that people who are highly dependent and vulnerable might find that living in a house in a busy suburban area is more confining than living in a village community.

Financially, the capital costs of moving someone from a hospital to a specially adapted house in the community, without health, recreational or educational services, is about £50,000, while a hospital site can be converted to a purpose-built village, using existing facilities, for about £20,000 per resident. Those figures were provided by Rescare, the National Society for Mentally Handicapped People in Residential Care, and they should not be ignored. Will the Minister use this opportunity to confirm whether he and his Government support the concept of village communities?

Future proposals for Orchard Hill should not be about substituting good care for possibly ill-thought-out Government policy and potentially unsound monetary gain. The aim of the Orchard Hill project should be to secure a better future for its existing residents and to ensure that the local national health service and Sutton council develop better and more flexible models of service provision for local people.

I am seeking a guarantee from the Minister that any future changes at Orchard Hill will improve the quality of life of the residents, not just maintain it at its existing level. I should also like the Minister to provide an assurance that, whatever the future of Orchard Hill, its residents will continue to have easy access to open space, with the high level of security that they currently enjoy. Should any of the Orchard Hill residents be moved, the new neighbours who will be living close to them should be educated and prepared to welcome them. I also want an assurance that alternative services to those that are currently available on site will be in place prior to the movement of residents; that the services that are currently free will remain free; that there will be equity between people of similar needs, regardless of their location; that adequate transport arrangements will be in place; and that the resources will be available for care in the community.

Before any action is taken, it needs to be understood how those changes might affect the resources available to a new generation of service users who might be looking for similar facilities.

I have spoken at some length, but it is a subject that affects the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in my constituency. I hope that the Minister will follow the developments at Orchard Hill very closely, and will ensure that the review process on which the trust is about to embark is transparent, and provides the best care and education for Orchard Hill residents.

8.3 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing the debate. I am grateful to him for indicating in advance some of the issues that he intended to raise. I hope to cover most of those this evening; if I do not, I shall certainly look at the *Official Report* and write to the hon. Gentleman on any points that are left outstanding.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the provision of health and education facilities at Orchard Hill and to mention briefly some of the wider issues concerning the development of services for people with learning disabilities. This is a very important issue. First, I am well aware that, for those using Orchard Hill and their relatives, this must be a very anxious time, and I am concerned to ensure that we provide the highest quality care and support for them now and in the future.

I shall start by covering some of the background to the services and to the situation at Orchard Hill. As the hon. Gentleman said, Orchard Hill hospital was developed next to the old Queen Mary's hospital for children. The service built up on the site when, in the early 1970s, children often could not be transferred to St. Ebba's hospital in Epsom because no beds were available. Slowly, the number of adults with learning disabilities grew, and in the late 1970s it was agreed to have a unit for adults with learning disabilities in the grounds of St. Mary's. That became Orchard Hill hospital. Moving to more recent times, Queen Mary's hospital closed in 1993, although the Orchard Hill site was retained.

Services for people with a learning disability have obviously changed considerably over the years in which Orchard Hill has been open. In the summer of 1999, Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth health authority issued a consultation document on the future provision of services for people who live at Orchard Hill. The consultation period ran until mid November and the health authority considered the responses in January 2000.

The relatives of three patients challenged the decision and were granted a judicial review at the High Court in July. Relatives were concerned about the fairness of the consultation process, the health authority's decision to close Orchard Hill and the health authority's failure, as they saw it, to take account of all the relevant considerations before taking its decision.

The judge ruled that the decision was unlawful on the third point: that the health authority had failed to take account of relevant considerations. Let me say this now: Ministers are always concerned when relatives feel compelled to have recourse to the law in such circumstances. That is particularly the case when the matter concerns vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our society, although I was pleased to hear that the health authority had provided advocacy services for the people with a learning disability and their families, to help them to make their case.

Let me move to the heart of the case. The judge felt that there were a number of grounds on which the health authority did not have adequate information. There was

evidence from correspondence and notes of meetings of prior promises of homes for life to patients and their relatives, and previously declared policy about the site. The judge declared that the indicative assessment that had been undertaken was not capable of supporting the health authority's decision on the future provision of services and that, at the very least, a public authority must take earlier promises into account when considering a course of action. Finally, he was critical of poor financial information—the hon. Gentleman mentioned that issue.

I am pleased, although not surprised, to hear that the hon. Gentleman is keen to ensure that the future of residents at Orchard Hill is secured and considered in a sensitive, open way and through individually discussed and negotiated care plans; so am I. He made several very important points. Let me begin to address them.

First, the health authority clearly needs to review its actions following the judgment. I believe that the health authority received the final written judgment only a few weeks ago, at the end of September. The health authority is committed to ensuring that people with learning disabilities, their relatives, trust staff and others are kept informed of future developments concerning Orchard Hill through a news sheet, letters and meetings. The authority is committed to discussing with them the need for further consultation.

The hon. Gentleman is keen, as are the Government, to ensure that any changes to people's services are based on thorough, high-quality assessments, and that any decisions are based on the overall best interest of the individual client. The health authority is leading a review of the assessment process, in partnership with a large number of stakeholders, including the relatives.

First, the new process will ensure that there is detailed information on the needs of individuals in terms of their individual and collective need for continuing health care services. Secondly, it will ensure that there is detailed information on the broad range of social care services needed by the individuals and the population of people living at Orchard Hill. Thirdly, it will ensure that there is detailed information about the assessment of the psychological impact on individuals that may be caused by moving them away from Orchard Hill. I believe that those were the three points on which the hon. Gentleman sought specific assurances from me.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand that these detailed assessments and the development of individual care plans will take some time. Until that process has been completed for all the residents, the health authority would not be in a position to consider again any preferred locations for future services, or the future of Orchard Hill. The health authority expects to be in a position to do so by the middle of next year. I realise that that may seem a long time, but it is obviously necessary for the assessment process to be thorough and comprehensive.

The hon. Gentleman is also anxious that future services fully meet people's needs, are provided equitably and are planned and provided in a timely and sensitive manner. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that that must be the case. Indeed, it must also be the case that the services that are provided are available and appropriate for a new generation of service users. We know from research that members of the new generation, rightly, have higher expectations and hope to live close to their families. We also know that there are increasing numbers of people with complex disabilities, and we must ensure that these services are available and appropriate for them.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the models of care for people with a learning disability. The Government are strongly committed to ensuring that people with a learning disability have the right to choose the kinds of services and accommodation that they prefer. We issued fresh guidance to local authorities and health authorities in July 1999 to confirm that, and we wish to ensure that commissioning policies reflect the diversity of needs and the rights of individuals to make an informed choice about where they live, when their preferred choice can meet assessed need and when it is affordable.

We also acknowledge that small-scale domestic accommodation can often provide a high quality of care. Such accommodation can offer more potential for social inclusion and enhanced rights. However, as in any society, some people choose—for a variety of reasons—to live in alternative communities. Indeed, the survey commissioned by the Association for Residential Care as part of the work on the forthcoming White Paper on learning disabilities found 73 such communities already in existence. People with a learning disability should also have that right and choice wherever possible, and we are very keen that this option should be open to them and that their preferences are, wherever possible, respected.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that nearly £3 billion a year is spent on health and social services provision for learning-disabled adults. We are keen to ensure that the current resources are spent effectively and efficiently in a way that delivers best value to people with learning disabilities wherever they live. However, as my hon. Friend the Minister of State announced last week, we are also looking at ways to ensure that the resources currently used to support former old long-stay patients, such as many of the people at Orchard Hill, are retained for learning disability services. As the hon. Gentleman says, educational opportunities for people with learning disabilities are provided on the site by Orchard Hill college. Those services are for those resident in Orchard Hill and for those living in the community.

Education services for people with a learning disability are very valuable. It is only in the past 30 years that people with a learning disability have received mainstream education. The Government have been very concerned about improving basic skills provision, and the Moser report recommended that further consideration be given to the needs of people with learning difficulties and disabilities. As the hon. Gentleman may know, the Government recently published a report entitled "Learning to Succeed" and announced £1.5 million for further developments in this sector. This, we hope, will lead to significant improvements in the teaching of basic skills for people with a learning disability. The initiative, together with the new Disability Rights Commission, will help to bring high-quality education to everyone with learning disabilities, no matter where they live.

It is the aim of Orchard Hill college to continue to provide a wide range of educational opportunities for people living at Orchard Hill and, increasingly, for those living in the community. We support such initiatives and it is our aim that such services continue to become better integrated with mainstream adult educational services.

[Mr. John Denham]

At a wider level, the Government attach great importance to improving services for people with learning disabilities. One of the core principles set out in the NHS plan is that services will be shaped around the needs and preferences of individual patients, their families and their carers. That must apply just as much to people with learning disabilities as to anyone else. Guidance issued to health and local authorities back in 1992 was based on principles of person-centred planning, choice and involvement of both service users and their family carers. Those principles have stood the test of time, but they have not been applied consistently. They will provide the foundation for future service development.

In October last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced that we would be developing a new national learning disability strategy. At the conference of the Association of Directors of Social Services last week, it was announced that the national learning disability strategy would be published as a White Paper in the early months of next year.

It has been 30 years since a Government took a comprehensive look at learning disability services. The need for this new strategy is long overdue. People with learning disabilities are among the most socially excluded and vulnerable groups. It is now time to make sure that help and support are in place to foster independence, provide new opportunities and deliver quality services. The new national learning disability strategy is intended to do just that. It will seek to eliminate the inconsistencies that we know currently exist, and it will ensure that the delivery and the quality of the services on offer improve. It will make a real difference to many thousands of people, and the strategy has been developed across Government and not just in my Department.

The hon. Gentleman raised several questions at the end of his remarks and I hope that I have dealt with most of them. If I have not, I shall write to him. He asked about charges, and I can assure him that NHS health care will, of course, remain free at the point of delivery. He asked about the level of security available for individuals. That must be got right and it will be based on an assessment of need. It is certainly our intention—overall and in the case of individual residents—that the quality of services should be improved and not just maintained as a result of the decisions that will ultimately have to be taken.

I have described how the health authority has responded to the outcome of the judicial review, but I hope that I have also been able to put the local issues into their wider context. I know that the health authority will welcome the hon. Gentleman's continued interest in this matter, and I will ensure that he is kept informed of future developments.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at sixteen minutes past Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 25 October 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 31 October.

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Wednesday 1 November.

ALLIANCE & LEICESTER GROUP TREASURY PLC (TRANSFER) BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 31 October.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Debt Relief

2. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What assessment she has made of the impact of writing off the debt of heavily indebted less-developed countries on the poorest in those countries. [132182]

4. **Mr. John McFall** (Dumbarton): What decisions were taken at the recent World Bank and IMF meetings on debt relief. [132184]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): There are 35 heavily indebted poor countries that could quality for enhanced debt relief, 30 of them in Africa. At the World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings in Prague, it was agreed that all possible efforts would be made to get 20 countries on track for debt relief by the end of the year. After that we will face great difficulty because, of the remaining 15 countries that could qualify, 11 are affected by conflict. We are hopeful that six countries may qualify next year.

The enhanced debt relief initiative requires all qualifying countries to focus their policies and resources on the reduction of poverty. The debt relief that is being made available will write off up to two thirds of those countries' debt.

Mr. George: I am grateful for that reply, and I think that the Government should be thoroughly congratulated on what they have achieved so far. I know that many Members on both sides of the House are anxious for the debt write-off to be a success.

Does the Secretary of State agree, however, that many challenges remain? Half the 120 million population of Bangladesh still live in absolute poverty. Is it not unacceptable that that country will not benefit from relief because it has already—responsibly—paid off its debt? Will the Secretary of State publish targets showing when the poorest of the 41 poorest countries are expected to experience the benefit of the write-off?

Clare Short: There is no doubt that Bangladesh contains a large number of very poor people, but it does not qualify for the heavily indebted poor countries initiative. We should be careful not to suggest, in our enthusiasm for debt relief, that all debt should always be written off. Poor countries need to be able to borrow and repay responsibly, so that they have a good track record and can secure foreign investment and enable their economies to grow. Bangladesh, with its new textile industry, has been expanding its economy very well. Bangladesh has problems, but debt relief is not the best remedy. It needs good international development assistance, and we in the United Kingdom have a growing programme.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we could show that the benefits of debt relief were going to the poor. He was right to stress that. The UK Government's objective was not debt relief at any price, but to lever policy that would bring real benefit to the poor, in terms of both better economic growth and better social policy. We believe that the framework of poverty reduction strategies is a great advance, but I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a target, because that will depend on good implementation. We will, however, be monitoring progress, and I shall be happy to report.

Mr. McFall: I congratulate the Government on their 100 per cent. debt cancellation initiative. It is not matched by multilateral institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, which are responsible for more than 35 per cent. of long-term debt in these countries. As a result, the first five heavily indebted countries receiving help pay more than half a million dollars to foreign creditors each year. That is more than they spend on health. Will the Government ensure that the multilateral institutions live up to their responsibilities, so that we can finally get the debt cleared?

Clare Short: The IMF and the World Bank are international public sector institutions, funded by taxpayers internationally. They will find it difficult to fund debt relief in, for instance, Zambia, which has enormous debts, unless the American Congress votes for United States contributions. We have real difficulties in

funding the existing initiative, and it would not be possible for the IMF and the World Bank to commit themselves to more.

This initiative writes off two thirds of the debt of the countries concerned. Those that have qualified so far will be spending 10 per cent. of their Government revenues on debt payments, and in most cases their social spending is higher than their spending on debt. The initiative is better than some critics suggest.

We never achieve perfection in this life, and the IMF and the World Bank cannot contribute more. We must work hard to persuade the American Congress to vote for its contribution, or we shall be in trouble.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Does the Secretary of State agree that even if all the debt of the world's poorest countries were written off, they would still remain poor unless we reformed the world's trading system? In that context, can she tell the House what she is doing to ensure that the United Kingdom and the European Union wipe out duty and quota systems so that the poorest countries can sell their goods all over the world and become less poor? Can she also update the House on progress with the Cotonou agreement, which has replaced the Lomé agreement?

Clare Short: I agree very much with the hon. Lady that we need a more just trading system and that developing countries need better trading opportunities. That is especially true in agriculture—the EU needs to reform that sector—and, in particular, the trade in processed agricultural goods, in which those developing countries have a natural advantage. That is one of the reasons why I believe passionately, and the Government in general believe strongly, that we need another trade round and that developing countries could make great gains from it. I am afraid, however, that there is no immediate prospect of reaching an agreement, not just because of the United States election, but because many developing countries are so burdened with their commitments under the Uruguay round that they are not demanding a round themselves. We have to keep up the argument and the agenda for trade reform that would bring real benefits to developing countries.

On the Cotonou agreement, which replaces Lomé, it is now agreed that poverty reduction is the central focus of all the development assistance and the way in which the assistance will flow has been simplified. I am hopeful that it will be a much better instrument of aid for the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries than that represented by the EU record to date.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): We welcome the initiatives that have been taken. I understand that, for example, Cameroon's debt has been reduced by a welcome $100 million, but that still leaves it paying $400 million a year in interest alone—a great deal of money, as my right hon. Friend would agree. What further steps can be taken with the IMF and the World Bank to ensure that the HIPCs initiative makes a substantial difference to some of those countries? Although we have taken welcome steps so far, I am sure that she would agree that there is much further to go. So far, this country has taken a lead internationally, but can we push that effort much further as we head towards the end of the year 2000, in which we hoped to make such progress?

Clare Short: No. It is my view that we will not persuade the international community to finance a more generous debt relief programme than the current one. As I have said, we have not received the American contributions—that is still in doubt—and we shall be in difficulty if we do not get them. Under the HIPCs initiative, $100 billion will be written off. People talk as though that is nothing, but it is a massive sum by any account, certainly given the budgets of those very poor countries.

Those countries will need other help, for example, continuing aid and other forms of assistance, such as better trading arrangements. Cameroon has just qualified to start on the process, but it has terrible problems because of corruption. It needs help with debt relief, but it needs to instigate reform, deal with corruption and prioritise the poor. We need reform from all sides, and that includes that undertaken by the Governments of the countries concerned.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): Everything that the Secretary of State has said does not change the fact that the timetable for debt relief has been badly misjudged by the Government. Last year, the Prime Minister said that 25 countries would get relief by the end of 2000. This year, the Chancellor confirmed that, saying that 25 countries would get relief by the end of 2000, and he should know because he chaired the IMF committee. However, by May this year the Chancellor admitted that the figure had fallen to 20. As we stand here today, only 11 countries have qualified and there are only nine weeks to go to the end of the year. What possible confidence can we have in the commitments of the World Bank, the IMF and the Government when the targets for helping the world's poorest and most vulnerable have been allowed to slip so dramatically? Is the Secretary of State prepared to guarantee the current timetable predictions of her colleagues, the IMF and the World Bank? We need to know.

Clare Short: Thank heavens, the Conservative party is in opposition because the hon. Lady clearly does not understand the problem of debt or the international system. For example, Côte d'Ivoire has had a coup and is therefore unlikely to qualify for debt relief. We need co-operation from all the countries that give debt relief and the qualifying countries must adopt the necessary reforms to receive it.

For the hon. Lady to talk as though the UK Government can control all that is completely foolish and shows that she does not understand what is going on. Ask anyone in the international system: Britain has been—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) stopped heckling, he might learn something. Clearly, he has many problems and needs to learn a lot. *[Interruption.]* He is still heckling. I wonder whether you, Mr. Speaker, could—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady just asked an ill-informed and foolish question and will not listen to the answer. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is still heckling continuously. Therefore, it is

difficult to speak and impossible for him to hear. I do not think that that is appropriate behaviour for the House of Commons. *[Interruption.]* He laughs, but—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I will decide what is appropriate behaviour. It is for the Minister to answer the question.

Clare Short: I am pleased to hear it.

We are very hopeful, but there is no possibility of the UK Government giving a guarantee. Can the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) give a guarantee that the Cameroon Government will start to deal with corruption and focus on poverty, that we will get some decent resolution of the coup in Côte d'Ivoire, and that Ethiopia and Eritrea will make peace and therefore qualify for assistance? It is impossible. What we will guarantee is that we will maintain the pressure on the IMF and World Bank to keep to the commitment that was made in Prague. We will continue to be the leading force for that.

Kenya

3. **Mr. Richard Allan** (Sheffield, Hallam): What projects on good governance her Department is supporting in Kenya. [132183]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): High levels of corruption and poor economic management have caused enormous damage to the economy and people of Kenya. The UK, along with all other development agencies, has made it clear over the past three years that support to Kenya would be conditional on firm action on corruption. A strong package has been negotiated with the IMF, which we support. We are now at the beginning of a difficult reform process in Kenya, which will require sustained Kenyan and international support.

Mr. Allan: I am grateful for that answer, but the Secretary of State will be aware that concerns are increasing over political stability in Kenya, with daily rumours about early elections and whether President Moi will stand down as required by the constitution. Two separate constitutional review processes are in competition. In that context, will the Minister consider increasing direct support from her Department to good government initiatives in Kenya, so that we see a successful election process? Small investment in such initiatives now may avoid the huge economic, social and human costs of further instability in east Africa, which would be caused by a flawed election process in Kenya.

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The situation is fragile. On top of the history of corruption, poor economic management and growing poverty, there is a very serious and terrible drought in Kenya, which is having bad consequences, so we should all worry for the future stability of that country. We are already providing assistance to try to ensure that there are fair and proper elections. We will do all that we can to ensure that that happens.

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): My right hon. Friend is highly regarded in Kenya for her on-going commitment. What discussions is her Department having with Richard Leakey in view of his commitment to change the long-standing political system in Kenya? Will she always bear it in mind that it is ordinary men, women and their families in Kenya who suffer enormously in terms of education and employment opportunities and health care? Whenever we talk about loans from either the IMF or World Bank, it is ordinary people who, sadly, suffer.

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why one must constantly make difficult judgments. There is no such thing as a perfect Government, even in the UK. Therefore, one is always trying to offer assistance and support for reform to improve the life of ordinary people, working with whatever Governments one can find. He is also right that President Moi's decision to appoint Richard Leakey and his team to take over the leadership of the reform process in Kenya represents a big commitment to change, reform and to tackle corruption. That has led us to back a new IMF and World Bank package, which we hope will focus on improving the lives of ordinary people, which are getting worse because of the drought.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): Does not the Secretary of State share my concern about reports in *The Eastafrican* newspaper on 5 October that the Kenyan drive against corruption lost steam the very second that the IMF endorsed its $198 million aid package, causing many diplomatic sources to comment that the Kenyan Government were simply out to hoodwink donors? Given that Britain has just increased bilateral aid to Kenya, is she confident that our aid is not simply propping up a Government who have no real intention to reform? Is it not time to make it crystal clear that British aid to Kenya and all other Governments will in future be more closely linked to specific delivery on governance and corruption, and that if they fail to deliver their aid will be stopped and the same amount of money will be pumped through non-governmental organisations and charities in that country, where it has a better chance of reaching those really in need?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman must learn that one cannot reform Governments who are performing badly by giving aid to NGOs and charities. That happens when one is simply bringing humanitarian relief and cannot lever any reform. That is an important point that the hon. Gentleman needs to learn. Our recent increase in aid to Kenya was £10 million for drought relief because people are going hungry. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) did not heckle me, I could answer his question.

I do not agree with the report in *The Eastafrican* that people have been hoodwinked. This is a sophisticated and complicated IMF programme with many conditions that must be met constantly so that support and help will continue to flow. That remains true of our support in Kenya and elsewhere. We have tightened up on conditionality since our Government took over from the one supported by the hon. Gentleman. I agree that we cannot be confident of success in Kenya. There are many difficulties and many corrupt forces. The economy is in bad shape and the drought is serious. We will have to do all that we can to try to keep the reform process on track, and we will do that.

Bilateral Aid

5. **Mr. Tony Baldry** (Banbury): If she will make a statement on the percentage of the United Kingdom's bilateral aid which goes to Commonwealth countries. [132185]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): About 62 per cent. of our bilateral programme supports Commonwealth countries, of which 85 per cent. goes to low income countries.

The Commonwealth has the potential to play an important role in poverty elimination and we are working to increase its effectiveness. The strengths of the Commonwealth are its informality and its ability to mobilise a wide and diverse range of countries.

Mr. Baldry: I thank the Minister for that answer and I am sure that the House agrees with his sentiments about the role and potential of the Commonwealth. Given that we have to give a fairly substantial amount of our aid budget to multilateral aid through the European Union, does the Minister have any proposals to increase the 60 per cent. of our bilateral aid budget that we give to the Commonwealth? Given that we can give to other countries through the EU multilateral aid budget, should not the first claim on our bilateral aid be Commonwealth countries rather than spreading it too thinly?

Mr. Foulkes: Yes, we want more of our direct assistance to go to the least developed and poorest countries, whether they be Commonwealth countries or others. We want the European Community to put its aid into the poorest countries as well and we are pressing strongly for that.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Will my hon. Friend confirm that we all want to see Pakistan return to democracy and full membership of the Commonwealth as soon as possible? Will he also confirm that we still regard Pakistan as a member of the Commonwealth and that we are still helping with many projects in that country to deal with its problems and poverty?

Mr. Foulkes: Yes, we are certainly concerned about the poor people in Pakistan. Whatever the Government, there are still many poor people and we look at ways to ensure that our help gets to them as quickly and effectively as possible.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): How can the Minister justify the recent announcement of increased bilateral aid to Malawi, a Commonwealth country, when we learn that it has just spent vast sums on buying 39 brand new Mercedes cars for Government Ministers? Does he agree with our high commissioner in Malawi, Mr. Finlayson, who said that the British Government would be embarrassed by that, particularly as it is not yet known whether it happened with the benefit of what he called

British balance of payments support?

Will the Minister take this opportunity to order an inquiry into that potentially serious scandal to reassure the British public that their aid money is not being abused in that way? Will he make it clear that any Government who abuse our help will no longer be supported by the British taxpayer?

Mr. Foulkes: As usual, the hon. Gentleman is trying to use diversionary tactics. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, and 64 per cent. of its people are malnourished. I give the hon. Gentleman and the House the absolute assurance that we ensure that our assistance goes to help the poorest people—

Mr. Streeter: To buy Mercedes.

Mr. Foulkes: We will continue to provide that assistance, despite the hon. Gentleman's continual heckling. He talks and he shouts, but we act to help poor people.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I have just returned from Bangladesh, where I witnessed for myself some of the most devastating floods that it has had for a century. Can my hon. Friend outline whether, and how, Bangladesh will benefit from the United Kingdom's disaster relief fund?

Mr. Foulkes: Our long-term development programme in Bangladesh is increasing in the next two years from £70 million to £90 million. Moreover, we have just approved about £1 million for flood-related assistance to the affected populations in the west of Bangladesh. We also anticipate approving more immediate flood relief and contributing to flood rehabilitation once the floods recede. I hope that my hon. Friend will be very pleased that this Government are taking quick and effective action.

Disaster Relief

6. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): If she will make a statement on the United Kingdom's international aid budget for disaster relief. [132186]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): Internationally, 5 per cent. of development assistance is usually spent on disaster relief. The United Kingdom does not set itself a pre-ordained limit, but spends according to need. In the previous financial year, 11 per cent. of my Department's budget was spent on disaster relief. That compares with 5 per cent. in 1997–98, and 8 per cent. in 1998–99. This year, we have provided relief for floods in west Bengal, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia, a hurricane in Belize, and a typhoon and tidal wave in North Korea. *[Interruption.]* We are also continuing to provide humanitarian assistance to people affected by conflict in many parts of the world. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must ask the House to come to order.

Mr. Brake: I thank the Secretary of State for her reply. She will remember stating about the Mozambique floods:

The problem is not money. The problem is deploying on the ground, getting the helicopters and boats where they are needed, and getting food and water to people.—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2000; Vol. 345, c. 22.]

Will the Secretary of State tell the House what progress has been made in establishing a fully capable United Nations rapid reaction disaster task force?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: an individual's chances of surviving a flood or other disaster are determined largely by the help available in the immediately succeeding hours. Although subsequent international assistance helps the country to recover, it is immediate action that saves people's lives, their animals and their livelihoods. Immediate action depends on strong systems already being in place in disaster-prone countries.

We are working with various countries and with the International Committee of the Red Cross to build up national red cross organisations. We are also working to strengthen the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, so that it can plan and deploy help and stockpiles of assistance around the world. Although the UNHCR is not as strong as it should be, it is strengthening, and it is a lot stronger than it was a few years ago. We will continue to work hard with the UNHCR to strengthen that international capacity. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that only the UN can play that central role.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Would my right hon. Friend like to acknowledge the brilliant work that has been done by British civil engineers in disaster relief efforts around the world? May I also take this opportunity to congratulate her on her honorary fellowship of the Institution of Civil Engineers, which was awarded to her to acknowledge her efforts in international disaster relief?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—my grandfather would be proud of the fact that I am now a properly qualified engineer—and agree with him. We have in Red R—Registered Engineers for Disaster Relief—an association of United Kingdom engineers who, at a moment's notice, will drop everything and work on projects to provide water and sanitation and to build dams. They proudly serve our country, and we should be enormously proud of them. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House take great pride in what they do.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): Does the Secretary of State agree that, sometimes, the most effective disaster relief should be delivered by the people living in the country? Does she not find it almost obscene that one of the richest countries in the world should be sending teams to sub-Saharan Africa to recruit nurses for the national health service, when those nurses should be left in the countries in which they have been trained?

Clare Short: I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman's fundamental point. Although it is good for people to share their skills internationally and to travel to other countries, and although we and other countries may have skill shortages and want to recruit internationally, we should not recruit highly skilled and expensively trained people from some of the poorest countries. As we develop our policy we must balance those two imperatives and my Department is trying to make sure that the Government do just that.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [132211] **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 25 October.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): First, may I welcome you, Mr. Speaker?

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I have further such meetings later today.

It would not be right for this Question Time to pass without paying tribute to the Father of the House, the right hon. member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), on his retirement. His 50 years continuous service in the House is a truly great achievement and I am sure that the whole House will join me in celebrating his long service.

On a sadder note, on behalf of hon. Members on both sides of the House, I should like to take this opportunity to express our profound shock at the death of Donald Dewar. Donald was an extraordinary friend and a fine politician. He was a tremendous servant of our country. I understand that, from Friday, a book of condolence will be made available for Members to sign in the Library.

Regrettably, another death occurred among Labour Members during the summer break: Audrey Wise was a great champion of women's and children's rights and made a very significant contribution to the political life of this country over many decades. She will be greatly missed.

Mr. George: I am sure that the whole House shares in those condolences.

The Prime Minister could be forgiven for believing that rural folk think of little else than supporting a handful of people who get their kicks from chasing wild animals all over the countryside. I can tell him that that is a sideshow; there are many more important issues. Here is a real test for the Prime Minister's rural credentials. Does he find it acceptable that, under the council tax system, once again this year £168 million of taxpayers' money will go towards subsidising the wealthy to have second homes when many thousands of rural folk do not even have their first home?

The Prime Minister: I am not entirely unsympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman has just said. A rural White Paper will be published shortly. We must emphasise the importance of services in our rural areas—services such as the health service, schools, rural post offices and transport services on which people rely. So I entirely agree that it is appropriate that we take all that into account and make sure that money is spent wisely for the benefit of people who live in the countryside.

Mr. Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the excellent work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which is based in Doncaster, in regenerating the former mining communities in England, Scotland and Wales? Does he

agree that the Government need to give serious consideration to extending the lifespan of the CRT beyond its present three-year period?

The Prime Minister: Of course we keep that matter under constant review, but we have made a big financial commitment to the former coalfield communities. That money is an important part of regeneration. Without that investment, many people would have no chance whatever of getting a job again. That is why the Government are committed to making that investment over the next few years. We will then review the position. It is important to make that investment, rather than cutting it as the Opposition intend to do.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): I join the Prime Minister in his welcome to you, Mr. Speaker, and in the tributes that he paid to the late Audrey Wise and the late Donald Dewar, whom we will remember across the House as a most courteous, charming and talented man. We also join the right hon. Gentleman in his tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), the end of whose 50 years in the House will be regretted by hon. Members in all parties.

On Thursday morning, the Prime Minister said that he was against the euro—at least for the rest of day. By that afternoon, he was in favour of it again. On Friday, he was reported to be cooling on the euro. On Monday, Downing street asserted that he was still as enthusiastic as ever about preparing for it. On Tuesday, we learned that he told the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown) that Europe was one of those issues where you have to mark your line and stick to it through thick and thin. Now, it is Wednesday and the prime ministerial jelly has wobbled back into Question Time. Will he tell us whether anything has happened over the past three months that has made any difference at all to his policy on the euro—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: We know from the great fly-on-the-wall documentary that the right hon. Gentleman rehearses his jokes very carefully. He should rehearse his policy a little better. It has always been the case that we do not say that we want to join the euro now, but neither do we rule it out. We keep the option open. The dividing line at the election will be between this party, which says that we keep the option open and give people a choice in a referendum, and his position, which—at least at the last telling—was to rule it out for the next Parliament.

Mr. Hague: Is it not the case that if the Government were not so arrogant and out of touch, their policy would have changed? Does he not agree that the pound and the euro are diverging, not converging, making any argument for early entry weaker, not stronger? Does he not agree that the idea that the euro is inevitable for everyone in Europe has now been blown away by the people of Denmark? Will he confirm that, in spite of all that, his policy remains to prepare for a referendum early in the next Parliament, which could mean, next year, scrapping the pound?

The Prime Minister: Our policy is, yes, to prepare and decide; that remains our policy. In principle, we are in favour but, in practice, the economic tests have to be met. The very things that the right hon. Gentleman is talking about show the wisdom of having a policy based on the national economic interest. The question that he has failed to answer throughout is how he can be against the euro in principle, but only for five years. That is an absurd policy and it will continue to be an absurd policy.

Mr. Hague: Nothing is more absurd than a Prime Minister who has committed us in principle to joining the euro saying last week that he was against it. He talks about his five tests; we know what they are: "Does Peter want it? Will Gordon let me? Will the French like it? Will Robin notice? Can I get away with it?" Why does he not listen to the Governor of the Bank of England, who said yesterday that it would not be in Britain's interests to risk membership of the single currency in the near future and that paving the way for joining it could destabilise our entire economy? Does not that mean that a policy of preparing for a referendum early in the next Parliament should now be changed, or is the Prime Minister as out of touch with the Bank of England as he is with the people of Britain?

The Prime Minister: The Governor of the Bank of England's policy is exactly the same. It is decided on the economic tests: jobs, investment and industry. The difference between the right hon. Gentleman and the Government is that, even if the euro were in our interests in terms of jobs, industry and investment, he is committed, as a matter of politics, to ruling it out in the next Parliament. If we ruled it out for the next Parliament as a matter of principle and on the basis of politics, it would have a devastating effect on British jobs and investment because industry wants to know that we will take the decision on what is best for the economy. That is why I say that we do not go in today because it is not right for the economy. However, if the economic tests are positive early in the next Parliament, we put it to the British people in a referendum. That policy is clear and right. A policy that is as clear as mud is to say that the right hon. Gentleman is against it in principle, but only for five years.

Mr. Hague: Is there no end to how out of touch the Prime Minister has become? Is he never prepared to admit that he has made a mistake? If he cannot admit a mistake on committing the country to join the euro, will he now admit that it was a mistake—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Hon. Members should not shout so loudly, as I cannot hear the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Hague: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If the Prime Minister cannot admit that he made a mistake in committing the country to join the euro, will he now admit that it was a mistake to increase petrol duties in this year's Budget?

The Prime Minister: No. I believe that the position set out in the Budget was right. What is more, that is the position that the right hon. Gentleman supported—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, in July, when the shadow Chancellor was asked whether the Conservative party was committed to cutting petrol duty, he said no. On the

Jimmy Young programme on 14 September, the Conservative leader was asked about cutting fuel duty, and said:

> It's my job to provide the country with an alternative government, not to ride around on whatever bandwagon from time to time.

Mr. Hague: So the Prime Minister believes that the petrol price rises are nothing to do with him. We all voted against the Budget increases in petrol duties. We voted against them in March and April, at the time of the Budget, which is different from supporting them. Now the Prime Minister thinks that petrol price rises have nothing to do with him. What a load of unleaded nonsense he believes in. He has increased petrol duties twice as fast as the previous Government, and by more in three years than any Prime Minister in history. As First Lord of the Treasury, he has given us the most expensive petrol in Europe and brought the country to a standstill. Will he now accept that those increases in the last Budget were a mistake?

The Prime Minister: I continue to say that these decisions should be made in the proper way in the Budget process. We must not do anything that takes risks with economic stability or vital investment in public services. The truth is that the right hon. Gentleman's policy is a policy for boom, bust and instability, and for £16 billion worth of cuts in our public services. We reject both those policies and, from now until the general election, we shall carry on until we get answers to questions about them.

Mr. Hague: We simply want to give back to the people of this country the money that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have stolen from them, which the Prime Minister wants only for re-election purposes. This autumn, we see a Government who are still determined to scrap the pound, not listening to the people of this country on petrol taxes, presiding over rising crime, facing a growing shortage of teachers, and turning the national lottery into a national shambles. Is not the real story of the Government this autumn that they are lost in their own spin and failure and that we have a Prime Minister who will not listen, will not learn and will not lead?

The Prime Minister: When the right hon. Gentleman is on the jokes, he is fine, but when it comes to policy he does not have a clue. He says that we have a big surplus, but three months ago he and the shadow Chancellor told us that our spending plans were reckless, irresponsible and would lead to higher interest rates. The right hon. Gentleman is still saying that, but now he wants to spend the surplus in every way possible.

In the end, there is a simple choice: do we want stability or a return to late 1980s policy when there was a budget surplus that was blown? The shadow Chancellor was at the Treasury at the time, but three years later we had the largest deficit on record, families were dispossessed of their homes, and there were record interest rates, spending cuts and tax rises. Do we want that policy or a policy of sustained growth and prudent investment in our public services? In the debate in the country, it is time that the right hon. Gentleman gave answers to questions.

Conservative Members do not keep their policies for long, so let me quote what the right hon. Gentleman said on the occasion of the shadow Home Secretary's little volte face on policy. When asked to criticise the right hon. Lady, he said:

> I will take no further action against the Shadow Cabinet as I told them to give truthful answers.

It is about time that the right hon. Gentleman took his own advice—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) is very noisy today. She should be quiet.

Mr. Alan Campbell (Tynemouth): Do the Government have any plans to introduce into the national curriculum the geography of north-east England, given that the Tory party website puts Tyne Bridge in Sunderland, and Cleveland in Durham above Northumberland? Does not that show the Conservative party's contempt for the north-east as a region?

The Prime Minister: I think that the Leader of the Opposition, when he is on his countrywide campaign, will need a slightly better map.

May I welcome my hon. Friend back to the House? I am glad that he has made such a good recovery. I hope that, over the coming months, we will be able to provide him with all the ammunition that he needs to expose the Tory spending cuts and that party's proposed return to the economic instability that this Government have got rid of.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): May I welcome you, Mr. Speaker, to your post?

Does the Prime Minister acknowledge that the Tory privatisation of British Rail means that today there are 25 train franchises, 10 train operators, seven maintenance contractors, three regulators and four rolling stock companies? Is that a sane way to try and deliver a safe national rail network?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to describe the chaos of privatisation that we inherited, but the very reason why it is important to have the Strategic Rail Authority is that we will get a far better, co-ordinated approach in the future. The other necessity is large-scale public and private investment. That is why investment in transport over the next 10 years is absolutely vital to renew the transport infrastructure, and why the Opposition's proposals to cut that investment would be so damaging.

Mr. Kennedy: Given that safety is an important element of public transportation policy, will the Prime Minister rethink his proposed part-privatisation of National Air Traffic Services Ltd., which comes before the House of Lords again tomorrow? The Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs described the part-privatisation proposal as

> the worst of all possible options,

yet the Prime Minister is pursuing it. Will he think again? The real danger is that he will turn NATS into the Railtrack of the skies.

The Prime Minister: We certainly will not do that, as the air safety aspects of the proposal will be kept in the

public sector. That is why I do not agree that the proposal is the wrong thing to do. We are engaged in the process that is under way with regard to air traffic control services in order to get the significant sum of money—probably £1 billion over the next few years—that those services need to be invested in them.

As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has said many times, we have to make a choice. We are not able to provide everything from the public sector. If we can get money in from the private sector, while at the same time making sure that air traffic control safety issues are kept in the public sector, I think that we can get the best of both worlds.

Ms Helen Southworth (Warrington, South): May I welcome you to your post, Mr. Speaker?

Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that starving the railways of cash for years was a serious error of judgment by the previous Government, and that privatising them in the way that that Government did was another? Will he ensure that Railtrack and the train operators use the significant new investment that this Government are providing quickly, efficiently and effectively for customers?

The Prime Minister: We will put that investment in as quickly as possible, but it will take time. For many years, the railways were subject to underinvestment. We need to renew our transport infrastructure. The transport plan was well received, but it is important to emphasise that this is a long-term project. We have to ensure that investment is sustainable: it is no use putting money in one year and taking it out the next.

That is why it is so important that we do not take risks with economic stability. We are able to talk about putting more money into schools, hospitals and the transport infrastructure only because the economy has been growing strongly and there has been prudent management of the country's finances. We must not take any risks with that either, but my hon. Friend is right: we need to get that money into our transport infrastructure, and to ensure that it renews that infrastructure and makes it as good as any in Europe.

Q2. [132212] **Mr. Simon Thomas** (Ceredigion): I know that the Prime Minister is a keen supporter of devolution. No doubt he will welcome the fact that, in next year's census, the people of Scotland will be able to tick a box to say that they are Scottish. Can he explain why the people of Wales will not be able to tick a similar box to say that they are Welsh? How does he suggest that we can remedy that disgrace? How does he justify this appalling treatment of the needs of the Welsh nation?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that no insult at all is intended to people in Wales. However, I understand that the National Statistician has announced today that there will be a new study into Welsh identity, using information gathered from the census—*[Interruption.]* If people wish to say that they are Welsh, we will count them as Welsh. That option exists, but obviously we are looking carefully at the points that the hon. Gentleman has made.

Q3. [132213] **Mr. David Winnick** (Walsall, North): Will my right hon. Friend tell me why so far, apparently, there has been no favourable decision on compensation for former prisoners of war of the Japanese, although I accept entirely that no previous Government have acted in this respect? Should we not follow the example of the Canadians regarding our obligations to a what is now a very small number of people, who suffered so terribly as Japanese prisoners of war, were treated as work slaves and tortured? Surely it is not too much to ask that at long last we honour our obligations and do what is right.

The Prime Minister: As I have said before, I have always had a good deal of sympathy with the campaign mounted by the Royal British Legion for additional compensation to be paid to far east prisoners of war. The suffering that they endured was appalling; the nation owes them a particular debt of honour for the sacrifice that they made and the memories that they have had to live with, literally for the rest of their lives. My hon. Friend has made his points in a very good and convincing way. I simply ask him and, more importantly, those affected, to exercise patience for a little longer. These decisions need to be taken in the run-up to the pre-Budget report. I ask my hon. Friend to accept that I have a great deal of sympathy with the points that he has made. It will not be very much longer until the decision is announced.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): May I ask the Prime Minister to suggest to the Secretary of State for Health that he reconsider the plans to cut the number of acute hospital beds in East Kent by up to 15 per cent.? At the height of summer, individual hospitals—and, at one point, all three hospitals—had patients on trolleys in corridors and offices.

The Prime Minister: I understand from my right hon. Friend that the hon. Gentleman raised this point with him yesterday, and he said that he would look into this specific case. On the general picture, however, we are increasing the number of critical care beds as part of our preparations for winter. Although I know that there are still nursing shortages in certain parts of the country, all in all, according to the latest figures, there are 10,000 more nurses in the health service today than there were three years ago. Of course there will still be difficulties in particular parts of the country, but slowly, step by step, improvements are being made.

Q4. [132214] **Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas** (Crosby): Will my right hon. Friend please ensure that, during the next few weeks, when millions of pensioners throughout the country will receive notice of a winter fuel payment of £150 and a free television licence, all letters carry words to the effect that, in the unlikely event of a Tory Government, this will be the first and the last payment that they will receive?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is of course right. The £150 winter allowance is important for pensioners because it does not reduce their benefit and is not taken into account for tax purposes. The free television licence for the over-75s is also very important. I think that the Conservative party is wholly wrong in

thinking that people want those benefits taken away. They do not—they will welcome the winter allowance, they will welcome the free television licences for the over-75s and I very much hope that they will also welcome what we do for pensioners as a whole.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The Prime Minister frequently refers to the economic criteria for entry into the euro. Will he explain to the House whether he has any criteria relating to the political and constitutional implications of entry into a single currency?

The Prime Minister: There is a serious constitutional and political question here: whether membership of the euro should be barred on constitutional grounds. Our answer to that is no. In the end, the proper test is that of the national economic interest. That is not to say that there are not important questions, but we, as a political party in Government, have resolved them in the way that I have described.

Let me put the point back to the hon. Gentleman. What is surely absurd—I think that he might possibly agree—is to be against the single currency on constitutional grounds, which is a matter of principle, but only for five years. I believe the truth is that there are only two sensible positions. One is to rule it out altogether on constitutional grounds—a principled position, but one with which I disagree. The other is to say that it is essentially a test to be made on economic grounds—that is our position. I can understand the hon. Gentleman's position and I can understand our position. What I cannot understand—and I bet that he cannot understand it either—is the Conservative position.

Q6. [132216] **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): I make no apology for returning to the question of rail safety, because commuters are travelling out of Bolton Trinity Street station on extremely overcrowded trains in what many people regard as unsafe conditions. For example, on 30 June a door flew open and a man who had multiple sclerosis almost fell out on to the track. Since the original franchises were let by the previous Administration with cost cutting in mind, is not refranchising an urgent necessity to improve the comfort and, especially, the safety of passengers?

The Prime Minister: Those are decisions that have to be taken in respect of each franchise. My hon. Friend is right in what he says about the mess of privatisation that we inherited, but every bit as difficult as that—in fact, possibly more so—was the chronic under-investment over a period of years. We have a simple choice in this country: if we want better public services, we have to invest in them and modernise them. That is the choice. We cannot carry on thinking that we can get decent public services—whether it be transport, schools, hospitals or police back on the beat—unless we are prepared to make that financial commitment. That is why, on our side, we are prepared to make the commitment and the Conservative side wants to cut it.

Q7. [132217] **Mr. Dominic Grieve** (Beaconsfield): Yesterday, the hon. Member for Central Fife (Mr. McLeish), who is about to become First Minister in Scotland, announced his proposals for the politicisation of the Scottish civil service, through preferential links with Labour MSPs and the Scottish Labour party. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity unequivocally to condemn those remarks, especially as, under the Scotland Act 1998, responsibility for the good running of that civil service rests with him?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question at all.

Q9. [132219] **Mr. David Stewart** (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): Earlier, the Prime Minister paid a tribute to the late Donald Dewar, who was well respected in this House. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Donald Dewar had a lifelong commitment to social justice? Will not the greatest memorial to Donald Dewar be to continue with that crusade, taking a million more children out of poverty?

The Prime Minister: Of course, that is right. The campaign for social justice means that we have to take decisions, such as the new deal for the unemployed, the working families tax credit—to help make work pay for people—and the increases in child benefit. We know from the Conservative party that, in respect of each one of those things—the new deal, the working families tax credit and the increases in child benefit—they are committed to taking them off people in this country. I think it is right that people have them. One of the reasons why we have a million extra jobs in the economy is because we are helping people back into work and making work pay. As a result of that, we are saving money that we can then invest in our public services.

Q10. [132221] **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What should I say to my constituents about—*[Interruption.]* What would the Prime Minister advise that I say to my constituents about the spending priorities of his Government in London—to my constituents and the patients of Harefield hospital, the premier cardiothoracic hospital in this country? Harefield faces imminent closure. The hospital has carried out more heart transplants than any other in the world. Yet in east London, with total equanimity, the Prime Minister sees more than £600 million of public money go down the drain with no shame or remorse from his friend Lord Falconer.

The Prime Minister: Leaving aside for a moment the particular case that the hon. Gentleman is making, the Government are putting investment into the health service while his party is committed to taking that investment back out. We really cannot have a situation where Conservative Members come to the House, stand up and demand extra money for public services when they are committed to cutting that money for public services.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will be aware, as will the entire House, that your predecessor was always a doughty fighter for the rights of Back Benchers, but particularly that your predecessor deprecated any practice of Government Ministers making outside the House statements that she said should have been made here. I hope that you will confirm that your policy will be to continue that.

Could you help the House, Mr. Speaker, by telling us—in the light of that and if you can give us that assurance—how it was that you felt able to give a press conference outside the House this morning, before you had been able to share your thoughts with Members of the House?

Mr. Speaker: Let me say that I have the highest respect for my predecessor, but she is gone. She is no longer the Speaker; I am the Speaker. I say this to the right hon. Gentleman: I made no statement. I called the press in because my home in Glasgow has been inundated by people from the press. They had no malice, but they wanted to speak to me, and that was all that they wanted to do. Many of you will understand, as many of you have families, that, for the sake of my family, I had that concern. The press corps here, many of whom are highly respected, had asked to speak to me about me—that is all: about me. I chose, instead of giving individual interviews, to speak to them as a body. I think that that was a proper thing to do. *[Interruption.]* Order. That was a proper thing to do.

I have a responsibility to my family, back home in Glasgow, to ensure that they are not pestered in any way. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I will never stop him from speaking to whom he wants to speak to and he will not stop me. Let me give this assurance: on anything to do with this House of Commons, I will be the first to come before the House of Commons and make a proper statement to the House.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. We know that, on Monday, a number of people contended for your job and I nominated someone other than yourself. The final decision was quite clear—an overwhelming majority, to say the least. Can we now work on the assumption that, the House having taken the decision on Monday, that will be accepted by all Members, and you will not be the subject of continued sniping and spite by those on the Opposition Benches—a small number, I believe—who simply cannot accept the democratic decision of the House?

Mr. Speaker: I have heard no sniping. Everyone likes a Speaker.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): With that happy note, Mr. Speaker, may I concur fully? I have enjoyed many an occasion privately with you in the Tea Room, when we have conferred on matters. However, may I trouble you to pursue the point of order that was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)? I have not had the opportunity to see the full transcript of what you said this morning, but I did see on the television that you said that you were not the Government's man—that you were the House of Commons' man, and that you were going to stand up for our rights. I am sure that all Members of the House will appreciate that.

However, I did raise with you yesterday a point regarding Ministers making statements outside the House and Ministers not being in the House to attend to their responsibilities here. Your predecessor, Speaker Boothroyd, made it very clear from the Chair to all of us that she expected Ministers to make statements here, not outside—that they should come and be answerable here—and she also made the point—

Mr. Speaker: Order. With respect to Speaker Boothroyd, Betty is no longer with us. You may want to have a quiet conversation with her outside the House, but it has nothing to do with us. The hon. Gentleman can be assured that if anyone—whether a Minister or a Back Bencher, a member of the Opposition or a member of a minority party—is in breach of the rules of this House, I will bring them to order. That is the best answer that I can give. *[Interruption.]* No; I am not going to continue; there are people who have other matters to raise.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I seek your guidance. Have you received either confirmation from the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions that he will be with us this afternoon or an apology for his intended absence?

Mr. Speaker: No.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I raise with you an issue about which I have given you notice. In the debate on Monday that secured your elevation to the Chair, it was repeatedly affirmed that Members are all equal in their rights, responsibilities and privileges. As far as I can tell, I, as an English Member, cannot ask in this place a question about the governance of the national health service in Scotland, yet, yesterday, a Scottish Member asked a question about the national health service in England and Wales. Is it in order for a Scottish Member to be able to exercise a privilege that is denied to Members from south of the border?

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. He makes an interesting debating point, but it is not really a point of order. Parliament legislated for a Scottish Parliament in 1998 and there were opportunities to debate those issues then. I also remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that it was only last year that the House debated and approved the recommendations of the Procedure Committee on the procedural consequences of devolution.

Rogue Traders

3.36 pm

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Fair Trading Act 1973 to introduce further powers to regulate rogue traders.

My Bill would amend the Fair Trading Act 1973 to deal effectively with rogue traders whose businesses sell shoddy or overpriced goods and sub-standard services and whose tools are misleading information, oppressive behaviour and high-pressure sales methods. The provisions of the Act for protecting consumers against such traders are out of date. It does not provide the means to take relevant and, above all, prompt action against rogue traders in today's marketplace.

At present, when a rogue trading practice is identified, the Act requires that the Director General of Fair Trading must, first, find out about the problem through local fair trading standards departments, who are then sent off to collect information and evidence, and secondly, look at the rogue trader activity only when it breaks the rules covered by existing consumer protection legislation or breach of contract. In other words, the bad practice must have already been dealt with under the law. Thirdly, the director general must then show that the rogue behaviour is "persistent". In other words, there has to be evidence of it going on over an undefined period of time. Fourthly, he must then try to get a written undertaking that the trader will stop that course of conduct. Finally, only if that undertaking is broken can the matter be taken up in court.

Therefore, the Director General of Fair Trading cannot make the trader give an undertaking. The time that it takes to collect the evidence is time enough for the rogue trader to take the money and run. Often, the rules being broken are not adequately covered by existing law and not easily evidenced for a civil breach of contract case. The rogue trader often uses careful lies that either only imply things or are incorporated into what is said but never into what is written down. In other words, the rogue trader is not playing by the same set of rules.

As consumers, we are not trained to question traders in detail and to nail down exactly what we are being sold. We assume reasonable behaviour and can be conned by the unscrupulous. The lengthy procedures required for the Office of Fair Trading to act leave consumers vulnerable to scams and allow rogue traders to make their money and move on. We are failing consumers by leaving such a gap in consumer protection law.

We buy over the internet, by post and by telephone, as well as in person, and we need consumer protection legislation that can keep up with the fact that we do not know the people from whom we buy and cannot rely on their being bona fide traders. Even if we ask at the local trading standards service, we can expect to receive only carefully worded warnings. It cannot tell us of its fears until it is too late, when the deed is done, the money spent and evidence taken in court.

Many victims of shoddy or overpriced goods, substandard services, misleading information, oppressive behaviour and high-pressure selling techniques are elderly, badly off, or vulnerable in some other way, but the activities of rogue traders are not confined to any one group. All consumers can be subject to such problems and to the ineffectiveness of our legislation.

The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux tells me that, throughout the country, its members receive frequent inquiries from consumers who suffer as a result of inadequate legislation to stop rogue traders. For example, a women in her 80s recently contacted a citizens advice bureau in the south. She is one of many persuaded to buy security equipment. Each time the trader calls, she is pressurised into buying more security, and has now spent more than £8,000.

Trading standards officers are aware of many similar examples. In my constituency of Luton, South, scare tactics are used to sell security equipment. On the doorstep, the salesman sadly explains that there have been many burglaries in the area recently to coerce elderly people into buying overpriced security systems and associated service contracts. In one instance, a 20-year service contract was sold to a 90-year-old woman. Elsewhere, an 80-year-old woman was coerced into paying more than £3,000 for plumbing work worth £600. There is even evidence of traders creating dangerous problems in heating systems to persuade consumers to buy a new system when the problem would have cost only about £50 to put right.

In Luton, South, trading standards officers are aware of a company selling local residents water purification systems, with the implication that their water is not fit to drink. The company leaves empty bottles with householders to be filled with tap water for collection and analysis by the same company. It is implied that the company is associated with the water authorities and that the water is unfit. The householder, believing there to be a problem with the water supply, is then sold a water purification system with an expensive after-sales service contract, often on a credit agreement with a ridiculous APR of 22.9 per cent. over five years. The cost can be more than £3,000.

In that instance, trading standards officers have no evidence at this stage of a criminal offence, but both they and the local water authority have tried to publicise the true nature of the sale. Although people have cancellation rights under the doorstep selling regulations and the Consumer Credit Act 1974, they are not yet aware of the deception and continue to be conned.

None of us here will have to look far to find examples of such practices. Another case in my constituency, with which I am dealing, involves elderly victims. One couple were told by a company called Florida Direct that they had won a free holiday. Naturally, they were over the moon, but they were asked for their credit card details to secure the prize. What they were not told was that they would have to pay for flights and part of the accommodation. Their credit card was used to withdraw £500 from their account, and they are still fighting to recover that money.

By empowering trading standards officers, my Bill will help to wipe out such practices. It widens the power to stop rogue traders by giving trading standards officers on the ground, who know what is happening locally, the ability to act immediately as soon as a problem comes to light. It allows the Office of Fair Trading and trading standards services to require a trader to cease the offending trade practices and gives the power of a banning order which can include compensation to consumers.

The Bill allows for prompt action, which means that rogue traders cannot continue to make their money out of the vulnerable while trading standards officers remain

[Ms Margaret Moran]

powerless to stop them. It does not limit action to cases where the existing law is being broken. It changes the request for a rogue trader to agree to better practice for a requirement to trade fairly. It gives that requirement teeth, with the penalty of a banning order.

The Bill also deals with the issue of the money paid by consumers, by allowing for compensation to victims of rogue trading. In short, it changes the treatment of rogue traders from, "Please will you be good in future, now that you have made your money?", to, "You will change now, or lose your right to trade and be made to refund that money."

The Bill catches all unfair practices and does not rely on a string of criminal prosecutions and/or civil cases before the problem can be effectively dealt with. It will also do much to strengthen consumer knowledge about what unscrupulous traders are up to through a requirement to publicise the content of banning orders.

The Bill trusts consumers with the information that they need to be the confident consumers described in last year's White Paper "Modern markets—confident consumers". It will thus allow consumers a measure of confidence in consumer protection, and evidence that they are being listened to. It puts the consumer centre stage.

The Bill will be a positive force for businesses, both for companies which suffer from the reputation of the rogue traders who will be caught by the legislation, and also because knowledgeable and demanding consumers are a positive force for business. I urge support for the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Ms Margaret Moran, Mr. Norman Baker, Mr. David Davis, Mr. Kerry Pollard, Helen Jackson, Helen Jones, Mr. Jim Dobbin, Mrs. Rosemary McKenna, Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick, Dr. Alan Whitehead, Mr. Alan Keen and Judy Mallaber.

ROGUE TRADERS

Ms Margaret Moran accordingly presented a Bill to amend the Fair Trading Act 1973 to introduce further powers to regulate rogue traders: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 10 November, and to be printed [Bill 176].

Opposition Day

[18TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Fuel Protests

Mr. Speaker: We now come to the first debate on the Opposition motions. I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I also wish to inform the House that Back-Bench speeches will be restricted to 12 minutes.

3.47 pm

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I beg to move,

That this House notes that, despite warnings from Her Majesty's Official Opposition, the Government refused to listen to the grievances brought to them by business and commerce, most particularly by hauliers, farmers, pensioners, the disabled and by those on low incomes or living in rural areas, thereby provoking the fuel protests in September; condemns the Government's initial complacency about the protests which later turned to panic; deplores the Government's repeated increases in taxation, despite having no mandate to do so and notes that the increases in the tax on petrol and diesel have become the symbol of the Government's betrayal of their tax promises; urges the Government to address the problems their tax increases have caused, by reducing tax on hard-working families, pensioners and businesses, including an immediate reduction in road fuel duty; and laments the fact that, despite the increases in tax on the travelling public, the Government has allowed the road system to deteriorate and has failed to deliver the improvements in the transport system which it promised and which the public expected.

First, Mr. Speaker, may I add my congratulations on your election? This is the first chance that I have had formally to do so.

Can there be any more explicit symbol of the Government's complacency, arrogance and evasion than the failure of the Deputy Prime Minister to be present in the Chamber today?

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I find that an astonishing remark from the hon. Gentleman. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister informed the hon. Gentleman exactly why he cannot be present today: he is attending a series of meetings on the closure of the west coast main line and issues related to the Hatfield crash. I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members who understand the Deputy Prime Minister's priorities will entirely understand the reason for his absence.

Mr. Norman: That is not what the Deputy Prime Minister's office told me. I was informed that the right hon. Gentleman was having meetings in his office, where I imagine he is sitting at this moment. Nobody will detract from the importance of his dealing with the Hatfield crash, but it is clear that he could have spared the time to be in the House today. The debate is about a crisis that almost brought the country to its knees, yet on the first occasion on which the House has had a chance to debate that crisis, the Deputy Prime Minister shows disdain for Parliament and the British people. What is the point of having a Secretary of State who will not appear for a debate on his own handling of a national crisis that almost

brought the country to its knees? The Deputy Prime Minister has been leading the Government's anti-car campaign. Only yesterday, he said:

> I am constantly available to discuss such matters either in statements or other debates . . . There are many matters that I am prepared to debate, and I commonly come to the House.—[*Official Report*, 24 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 150.]

That apparently does not apply in a time of national crisis.

Why is the Deputy Prime Minister not here? The truth is that he probably wanted to be here, but he has been told not to be here. He has become the most ridiculous figure in the Government. His attitude is so cynical that he sends his baggage by chauffeured Jaguar to the House of Commons while he takes the train to appear environmentally friendly. His contempt for Parliament is also contempt for farmers, hauliers, pensioners and those who live in the countryside—contempt for the people whom we are elected to represent. They will see that his place is empty today, and they will know that he has learned nothing from the crisis.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): If we are to pursue such a fatuous debating style, I could ask the hon. Gentleman why the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) was on holiday during the fuel crisis, when, according to the *Evening Standard*, he had been given advance notice of the protests. I shall not stress that point, because it is fatuous. The hon. Gentleman should explain why his party is being so disingenuous. It launched the fuel escalator and then disclaimed responsibility for it—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That intervention was far too long.

Mr. Norman: For the sake of the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell), I shall ignore that ridiculous intervention. We are in a fine state when hon. Members cannot go on holiday without the country coming to a standstill. Perhaps the Deputy Prime Minister is on holiday now. Why is he not here? That is the question.

The Government have created a problem by increasing tax by stealth. They have turned that problem into a crisis through their complacency, and the crisis into humiliation through their sheer incompetence. They had no mandate to raise taxes; they promised not to raise them. The Prime Minister said:

> We have no plans to increase taxation at all.

They promised to protect the isolated and pensioners, and not to be a tax-and-spend Government. Fuel duty has become a symbol of the tax betrayal of the British people.

There is no point in the Minister and the hon. Member for Harlow hiding behind the fuel duty escalator, although I am sure that they will try to do that. The Government had three Budgets in 21 months and they increased the escalator to 6 per cent., but they did not use the money for the environment or transport. The motorist now pays £350 more a year in tax, yet the Government have spent less than the previous Government on transport.

In one of the shabbiest manoeuvres of the Parliament, the Government said that they would come off the escalator, and they put up duty by an "inflation" increase of 3.3 per cent., while pensioners got an increase of 1.1 per cent. Seventy-five pence does not buy even one litre of petrol. What sort of a system of social justice is that? In three years, a Labour Government have increased fuel taxes by 34 per cent. and the state pension by only 8 per cent.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Will the hon. Gentleman explain why *The Daily Telegraph* and the AA described the last Budget as the best Budget for the motorist for eight years?

Mr. Norman: I do not believe that *The Daily Telegraph* supported the increase in fuel duty. It has been explicit about its view of a manoeuvre that uses a different inflation rate for pensioners from that for fuel tax. That is a shabby manoeuvre.

Let us not have any hiding behind a green smokescreen either. It is technology and not taxation that is reducing pollution from our cars. Since 1997, traffic has increased by about 6 per cent., but pollution is falling because of cleaner car technology. The only effect that the Government's campaign against car users in increasing the price of travelling by car can have is to marginalise those who can least afford to pay the price. The Government are penalising the poor, pensioners living in the countryside and farmers, whose livelihoods are threatened. The Government have used the most regressive tax for their own revenue-raising purposes. We have by far the highest fuel taxes—

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington) *rose*—

Mr. Norman: I shall not give way. I wish to make some progress.

We have by far the highest fuel taxes in Europe, and there is no excuse for that. The Government have increased the annual tax on road users by £8 billion. They are driving 55,000 hauliers out of a job. Last year alone they destroyed the livelihood of 22,000 farmers. They have penalised those on low incomes who depend on the car, such as farmers, pensioners living in isolated areas and the disabled.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it seems that, ironically, people in the countryside—farmers, hauliers, those who work in the countryside and people living in rural areas—are paying the most for fuel even though they tend to depend the most heavily on haulage and private transport?

Mr. Norman: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Farmers and those living in the countryside in constituencies such as his are being marginalised and penalised. We are talking about a regressive tax that hits the most vulnerable first and the Jaguar drivers last.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Norman: No. I wish to make some progress.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: Yes.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Following the fuel protests, the Tories announced on television that they would cut

[Mr. Campbell-Savours]

petrol by 3p a litre. The hauliers want a cut of 15p. How much is the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) offering them?

Mr. Norman: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised that question. I shall refer later to the Brit disc. It is our proposal to—

Mr. Campbell-Savours: How much?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has already made an intervention. He must not shout, "How much?".

Mr. Campbell-Savours: How much?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must behave himself.

Mr. Norman: The Government have masqueraded as a green Government. I have no doubt that we shall hear more about that today.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The British haulage industry wants to know the answer to my question. Why cannot the Tories answer it now on the Floor of the House? What is the figure—

Mr. Speaker: Order. These are matters for debate and have nothing to do with the Chair.

Mr. Norman: The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) is persistent, but there can be no doubt about who in the House is the friend of the hauliers. The hon. Gentleman may like to know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, met representatives of the Road Haulage Association only this morning. We are proposing a cut in duty. We have proposed the Brit disc and other measures.

The Government have done nothing. Indeed, they have tried to assert that there is no need to do anything. They have masqueraded as a green Government. They have disguised their stealth taxes as something to do with the environment. Yet they have put nothing back into transport and nothing back into the environment. They have spent less on the transport system than the previous Government. The real truth is that this has been a cynical exercise in tax raising. The Minister for the Environment and the Deputy Prime Minister have proved mere patsies in the hands of the Treasury.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Norman: I shall not give way. I wish to make some progress.

Ministers cannot say that they were not warned. We told them and we voted against the previous four increases in duty. The director general of the Confederation of British Industry told them:

> The Government must address the overburdening nature of tax on fuel.

Ben Gill, the president of the National Farmers Union told them:

> We have said over and over again to the Treasury that it was only a matter of time before the farmers' patience on fuel taxes runs out—the current level is extortionate.

The Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association gave similar warnings, but the Government would not listen.

The East Anglian hauliers even tried to set up a meeting. They wrote to the Prime Minister, to the Deputy Prime Minister and to the Chancellor, and I have their responses. They read:

> I regret that pressures on

the Minister's

time make him unable to attend.

> Unfortunately, the Chancellor regrets he must decline your kind invitation.

> Sadly the PM's diary commitments make it impossible for him to join you.

and

> It has not proved possible to find a Minister to attend

on his behalf. They did not want to know. They were in denial.

Then the protests started. First, a small group at Stanlow oil refinery, then a few more, and then the whole country joined in.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: No.

How did the Government respond that fateful first weekend? They treated the protest with provocative disdain. Lord Macdonald went on the "Today" programme when the protests first started. He had an opportunity to say that he understood and was listening, but he dismissed the protesters as un-British. That first weekend, the Secretary of State for Scotland twice claimed that the Government had not increased up duty at all. Astonishingly and absurdly, throughout the week, Ministers, including the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, carried on claiming that the Government had not put up fuel duty.

Mr. Blizzard *rose—*

Mr. Norman: It would be wrong to be critical of junior Ministers alone. The real question is why it was left to them. Where was the Prime Minister? Was he touring high-tech sites trying to dodge the protest? Where was the Deputy Prime Minister? Hiding in some Chinese restaurant? *[Interruption.]* Where was the Chancellor? Nowhere to be seen. He was enjoying the sight of his colleagues stewing in the juice of his stealth taxes. *[Interruption.]*

Not until Tuesday did senior Ministers put their heads above the parapet. When they did, was it to say, "We have understood. We are listening, and we are on the job"? Not a bit of it. They tried to blame everyone but themselves—it was all the action of a small minority; it was the oil companies; it was all down to intimidation. *[Interruption.]* In the Prime Minister's immortal words:

> It will all be getting back to normal within 24 hours.

Normal? Business losing up to £250 million a day, schools closing, shops running out of food, street cleaning suspended, funerals postponed, Portsmouth hospital running out of insulin, operations cancelled: the only things that were normal were the spin, the hype and the dissimulation. *[Interruption.]*

The only thing that was normal was the fact that the Government knew nothing about how business worked or how tanker drivers were employed. They thought that oil companies, like Victorian mill owners, could order their drivers back to work. *[Interruption.]* The only thing that was normal was that the Government looked round for someone else to blame. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We cannot have a free-for-all. Hon. Members should not shout across the Chamber. That is not what I am looking for.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): We are trying to keep ourselves awake.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I will keep the hon. Gentleman awake.

Mr. Norman: The Government looked for someone else to blame. They were in denial. Even in the midst of humiliation they could not understand what had happened. The Deputy Prime Minister—I am sure he is listening—said:

> I can't understand why farmers complain. They can use red diesel at 3p a litre tax.

He obviously does not understand that farmers have to drive their stock to market, their feedstuffs to the farm, and their children to school in remote areas. They cannot use red diesel for that.

Mr. Blizzard: The title of the debate is "Fuel Protests". The hon. Gentleman said at the beginning that the fuel protests had brought the country to a standstill. Indeed, he has just outlined the mechanism by which it was brought to a standstill, and the effects of that standstill. It was brought to a standstill by people blockading fuel depots. Will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to condemn those who parked their vehicles and blockaded fuel depots, thus threatening hospitals?

Mr. Norman: We waited a long time for that intervention, and it illustrated admirably the fact that Labour Members are still in denial. They think that it was a blockade. It was not; it was a protest. They think that it was all to do with intimidation. There was scarcely any intimidation.

Mr. Miller: That is not true.

Mr. Norman: Let me read this from *The Observer*, dated 17 September 2000.

> Though there were instances of intimidation—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I appeal again for calm. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) is entitled to a hearing.

Mr. Norman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The report states:

> Though there were instances of intimidation, police say they have recorded no official complaints . . . Relations with the police were good. Negotiations to allow through fuel for emergency services were amicable.

A spokesman for Cheshire police, in charge of the protests at Stanlow, where the blockades started, said:

> We had no reports of intimidation in Stanlow at the time. They have been logged subsequently. As far as we were concerned, with the exception of a couple of incidents, the protests were peaceful.

Mr. Miller: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that I have a list, prepared by the oil companies, of 185 instances of intimidation? Is that not a reasonable source of information?

Mr. Norman: I think that the police are a very reasonable source of information. While we accept that there may have been some instances, the question is, who leant on the oil companies to prepare their list in the first place?

The Government are still in denial. They want to think that it was all down to intimidation; they want to think that it was all down to the oil companies; they want to think that it was all down to blockades. In fact, it was a tax revolt supported by most of the British people.

Just to add to the provocation during the week of the protest, a transport Minister said on "Newsnight" that he had been consulting closely with the hauliers forum throughout the year. He omitted to mention that the chairman of the Road Haulage Association had just resigned from the forum, saying:

> we have been stonewalled, fobbed off and passed from pillar to post.

It was the Government who, with their arrogance and complacency, enraged the protesters and public opinion. After the famous 24-hour deadline for normality had come and gone, we witnessed the sight of a panic-stricken Secretary of State for Health threatening meltdown. The National Blood Service had to issue an announcement accusing him of scaremongering.

This had all the classic hallmarks of a new Labour crisis. First the Government denied that there was a problem; then they tried to spin it away; then they made promises that they could not keep. Finally, they resorted to scaremongering. This was a protest of their own making, turned into a crisis by their own complacency, which became a humiliation that they still do not understand.

Since then, the pattern of arrogance and evasion has continued. What could be more disgraceful than attempts, through smears and leaks—at a time when what the country needs is listening and conciliation—to claim that the crisis was all to do with blockades or intimidation, when we all know that it was not?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: No. The hon. Gentleman has had his chance and blown it; he has made far too much noise already.

The protest was supported by the vast majority of decent people in the country—hard-working people, car drivers and non-car drivers. According to the MORI poll,

[Mr. Norman]

it was supported by 84 per cent. of the public. Astonishingly, 76 per cent. of those who had no car supported the protest. If the Government still seriously think—as they evidently do—that they can drive a wedge between the protesters and the public, they are making yet another fatal mistake.

We are not talking about special interest groups. We understand the demands for a Brit disc scheme. We understand the case for special rebates, but people do not just want special tax breaks, loopholes or fiddles; they want a tax cut. The protest was a taxpayers' revolt. Only the Government could think of a taxpayers' revolt as a hauliers' blockade. People are saying that they want fairness and honesty in taxation. They want no more stealth tax. They want a cut in fuel duty now.

The Prime Minister sought refuge in the argument, which we heard again earlier, that a cut in tax means a cut in health or education.

Mr. Efford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: No, I will not give way.

Everyone knows that the Chancellor has a war chest and that he is planning to spend it for his own purposes ahead of the election. He knows it; we know it; the public know it—perhaps the only person who does not know it is the Prime Minister.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Norman: No, I will not give way. I have given way plenty of times and many other Members want to speak.

Only this week, the Ernst and Young report confirmed that there will be a £16 billion surplus this year. The fact is that the Chancellor is profiteering from the increase in crude oil prices. Every time the oil price increases by $1, he makes an extra £330 million in revenue from petroleum revenue tax and VAT. He has not only a financial but a moral duty to alleviate the hardship that he has created. If there was a green argument for increasing duty when the price was low, there can be no such argument when the price is at an all-time high.

The Government must act now to save the countryside and those who live in it. If there is a green argument, it is not about the cost of petrol and pricing people off the roads, but about the future of the countryside as a working environment in which farmers can earn an honest living.

Mr. Efford *rose—*

Mr. Jon Owen Jones *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells is not giving way. It is not the done thing to stand while another Member is addressing the House.

Mr. Norman: The Government must act to save the road hauliers who are going out of business and those who are conceding their businesses to foreigners. The number of foreign lorries is growing in this country. The Government must act to help those who are less well off and depend on their cars. If they do not act, the public will—and the Government will have only themselves to blame—not just on the streets, but at the ballot box.

September was a watershed in the life of new Labour, and the clock is now ticking. The Prime Minister, who made his political creed out of being in touch, has now made a principle of being out of touch. The Deputy Prime Minister said that he was always available for debate, but he dare not show his face today. They created the crisis; they raised taxes with no mandate; they manufactured their own humiliation and they have been living in denial ever since. The Prime Minister said that everything would get back to normal within 24 hours. On the contrary, for new Labour, things will never be the same again.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Meacher to move the amendment.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has intervened several times. Many hon. Members want to get into the debate. I have had to put a time limit on speeches and he is taking away their time. Does he still have a point of order?

Mr. Campbell-Savours *indicated dissent.*

4.15 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"applauds the tough, long-term economic decisions taken by the Government to create a platform of stability on which to invest in education, health, transport and law and order, building a Britain where there is opportunity and security for all; recognises the difficulty that has been caused to some sectors of the economy due to the rapid increase in world oil prices over the past 18 months; welcomes the Government's determination to set its economic and fiscal policy within the context of the normal budget and democratic processes; deplores the previous Government's record of boom and bust and under-investment in the nation's vital public services; notes that the proportion of the cost of petrol accounted for by VAT and duty is lower than when this Government took office in May 1997; welcomes the Government's environmental record which has seen Britain lead the world in the fight against global warming; and welcomes the Government's 10-year plan to modernise the nation's transport system, cut congestion, deliver real choice and see a 42 per cent. real term's increase in spending."

May I take the opportunity—it is my first—to congratulate you warmly, Mr. Speaker, on your elevation to the Chair? I hope that you enjoy your speakership as much as we are delighted to see you occupy it.

It is always a pleasure to welcome the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) to the Dispatch Box, on this occasion to debate the countryside, fuel prices and the environment. It is not so much what he says as the way he tells them.

One would never guess, listening to the hon. Gentleman's speech about transport and the countryside, that his Government left the countryside so denuded of public transport that, by the end of their Administration, fewer than one in four parishes had even a single bus service once a day. One would never guess from his denunciation of the fuel duty escalator that it was his

Government who started it and we who ended it. One would never guess, when he referred to his party's concern for the countryside, that his party was responsible for the biggest concreting-over of the countryside in road-building programmes since Roman times. One would never guess that the biggest invasions of the green belt—the sell-off of 3,000 acres of green belt for development, together with the most extensive damage of sites of special scientific interest—all occurred in those years of wanton destruction.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Meacher: I will in a moment.

One would never guess, when the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells finally came to his killer fact—that his party would cut 3p per litre off fuel duty—how that was to be paid for, let alone what it would do to the environment. It would, in fact, cost more than £1 billion. That is perhaps rather small beer for a party that has a £16 billion hole in its public accounts.

The hon. Gentleman's speech was, let us be fair, an entertaining flight of fancy, but it was more devoid of answers and more full of holes than a Swiss cheese. For a change, let us turn to the facts.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Meacher: I will in a moment.

September saw widespread protests in the UK, throughout Europe and further afield about the cost of fuel. Those protests followed large increases, as we are all aware, in the price of crude oil: from around $10 a barrel at the beginning of last year to more than $30. That has been a global problem. Other countries affected by the protests included France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Holland and even Australia.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Meacher: I will as soon as I have made the point.

Since the March 1999 Budget, petrol prices in the UK have risen from 66p per litre to about 80p per litre today, an increase of 14p, but only a very small percentage—1.9p—of that increase was caused by the 2000 Budget. That was the lowest Budget increase in fuel duty for 11 years.

Mr. McLoughlin: I am grateful to the Minister for the way in which he is putting his explanation. What has caused the biggest increase in fuel cost? Has it the been the increase in crude oil prices, or the effects of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budgets since he became Chancellor?

Mr. Meacher: Over the past 18 months *[Interruption.]* I can talk about a longer period if that is what the hon. Gentleman wants. It is true that, under his Administration and this Administration there has been a long-term and continuing reduction in the price of oil. In 1993, the hon. Gentleman's Government decided, quite rightly in my view, to introduce the fuel duty escalator. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we continued it because when the price of oil continues to go down steadily and over a long period it is right to remind motorists that there is an environmental external cost of motoring that needs to be read into the petrol price.

Now that we have had a tidal wave of price increases from the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries it is absurd to continue with the fuel duty escalator. That is exactly why the Chancellor has abandoned it. He has also said—it is sensible and right—that he will take account of all the relevant factors—environmental and others—in determining, on a case-by-case basis, the appropriate rate of duty. He will certainly take account of the environmental cost.

Having said that, I want to take issue with what was said by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells. The Government have recognised—of course we have—that strong feelings are aroused by the issue of fuel prices. We have been listening and we will continue to listen carefully and in detail to those concerns. Having listened, we have already taken substantial action.

Mr. Blunt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: I am happy to give way, but I am about to tell the hon. Gentleman about the action we have taken.

Mr. Blunt: The Government's amendment to our motion states that the Government recognise

the difficulty that has been caused to some sectors of the economy due to the rapid increase in world oil prices over the past 18 months.

Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that any of those difficulties have been caused by the Government's taxation policies?

Mr. Meacher: I believe that during the time that we have had to face the consequences of those enormous increases in international oil prices the increase caused by Government fuel duties is marginal.

The hon. Gentleman must take account of the fact that for hauliers, it is not just a question of fuel duty. They are concerned about wider taxation. If we compare the situation abroad, we can see that foreign hauliers have to pay toll duties and higher VAT. I remind the House that corporation tax in this country is the lowest of any industrialised country and that helps many hauliers.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I will not give way now. I am aware that this is a short debate and that many hon. Members wish to take part. I will give way later, but I want to make some progress.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I will give way to my hon. Friend later.

Last November, the Chancellor abolished the fuel duty escalator and, as a result, duty is now 6 per cent. lower, in fact it is 3p less per litre—where did I hear that before?—than it would otherwise have been. *[Interruption.]* I am delighted that that has pleased Opposition Members. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I cannot allow the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) to shout across the Floor. It is not helpful at all.

Mr. Meacher: The Chancellor also announced that, in future, all real-terms increases in fuel duty will be put

[Mr. Meacher]

back into investment in transport. That contradicts something wrongly said by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells. Substantial assistance for hauliers was delivered at the last budget in the form of large reductions in vehicle excise duty for heavy lorries at a cost of £45 million to the Exchequer. Also, the introduction for 44-tonne lorries was agreed from next February. The VED for five-axle 40-tonners was cut by no less than £1,800 and by £500 for 38 and 36-tonne lorries.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): The Minister is making the very fair point, which was made to me last week by hauliers, that much of the effect has been caused not by fuel tax policy, but by external factors. Nevertheless, does not the Minister accept that, for hauliers, the combined effect of world oil prices, the exchange rate and the tax has created a situation in which not only they, but the customers who depend on them to get their goods to market cannot survive? That is the issue that the Government will have to address.

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman perfectly fairly makes the point that, as he said, the combination of all those factors at this time has produced a perhaps unique situation. That is exactly why the Chancellor has made it clear that he has been consulting extensively with all the relevant interests and that he is continuing to do so. As the hon. Gentleman knows very well, the Government will be coming forward with a clear statement on the best way forward to take account of all those circumstances.

As I said, for the past month Ministers have been having regular meetings with representatives of the haulage industry, farmers and representatives of the fuel protesters. Discussions on the competitiveness of the road haulage industry—which is precisely the point just made by the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce)—are continuing through the road haulage forum. Last week, I attended the conference of the Countryside Alliance, to listen to its concerns about the impact of high fuel prices on people in rural areas, and I made it clear that the issues raised have been taken very seriously.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Will the Minister now come clean with the House? Surely he agrees that, since this Government came to power, the increase from taxation has been far bigger than the increase from the movement in oil prices. As for the price of diesel—which is affecting the haulage industry, and driving it into bankruptcy—does he remember the 12 per cent. increase in 1999? That is within his 18-month period. Will he not take that into account and just come clean that it is the Chancellor who is robbing the motorist and the haulier?

Mr. Meacher: The right hon. Gentleman has a great deal of experience and knowledge, but I think that he is making a very partisan and unreasonable point—*[Interruption.]* He knows that perfectly well. Until the early months of last year, oil prices were continuing to decrease to some of the lowest real-terms prices that we have ever experienced in the international oil industry. It was therefore entirely proper and right to continue and extend what the previous Government had done in the fuel duty escalator, and that is exactly what we did. However, we did take account of the fact that there are substantial cost effects of doing so, and that some of the hauliers certainly would have suffered as a consequence.

It is for precisely those reasons that we have used other means to ensure that those cost pressures are reduced. The reductions in VED have been extremely large. The Chancellor may well decide to continue them, but that is a matter for him. However, we have been very well aware of the situation, and that it is not only the fuel duty that is a relevant factor.

I also wish to make it clear that the Government have repeatedly stated—I state it again now—that we will be not be press-ganged into making short-term decisions on taxation policy outside the normal Budget cycle. The Government have a duty to govern in the interests of the nation as a whole, and we will.

I am not here—I do not think that Opposition Members expect me to be here—to discuss the Government's future taxation plans. That is a matter for the Chancellor, and he will be making his pre-Budget report shortly. He will, as I said, make decisions in the light of all relevant factors—which include not only the level of tax, but all environmental and other factors.

If anyone doubts that, let me remind the House that he is the Chancellor who, in the last Budget but one, produced the greenest Budget ever; who is committed to a climate change programme, which we shall publish in a few weeks and will set out ambitious CO_2 reductions, including in transport; and who, in almost all his Budgets, has produced a string of fiscal measures designed to encourage cleaner fuel-efficient motoring. I think that the nation can trust him to take a very sensible and balanced decision.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. He made an important point about global warming and the Chancellor's efforts in greening our policies. Will my right hon. Friend make the case for the environment, contrary to the arguments from Opposition Members, as in the past decade the carbon dioxide from transport has risen from one fifth to one quarter of the carbon dioxide produced in this country? Opposition Members want to duck that argument, but the previous Government introduced the fuel tax levy because they recognised that something had to be done about global warming, which is even more important than concerns about taxation policy. It is important and that needs stating.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman made a meal of that intervention.

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend makes a fair point and I endorse what he said. When he and other hon. Members see the climate change programme which will be published shortly, they will see that we have fully taken on board that point.

It is not just a matter of what the appropriate taxation level should be. In 1997 we inherited from the previous Government a public transport system that was in the

most rundown state for decades. I say that advisedly. That appalling legacy undoubtedly contributed to the frustration and anger that was manifested last month.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr. Meacher: Having had experience of the hon. Gentleman in Committee, when he always jumped up and said, "On that point", I shall test him and find out.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the Minister. On the subject of the Government's record, there have been four increases under the fuel escalator in three years. Until last Sunday the Minister was still advocating that we should use the fuel escalator to increase prices above the rate of inflation. Is he still in favour of it or not?

Mr. Meacher: In answer to an earlier question, I made it clear that my view is that the fuel duty escalator had a very real role and I respect the decision of the previous Government to introduce it. I also think that we were right to continue it. I repeat that where there is a massive and unprecedented increase in the international oil price, the role of the fuel duty escalator simply disappears and the only thing to do is abandon it. I have also said—and it is certainly the Government's position—that we are not abandoning environmental considerations. We shall certainly never do that. Indeed, they are a very strong component of the climate change programme, but we have to look at all the considerations at the right time, year by year, and that is what the Chancellor has said he will do.

Mr. Norman: Before he moves on from that point, will the Minister make it quite clear to the House whether he is saying that, in his view, if the oil price were to fall again it would be right for the Government to bring back the fuel duty escalator?

Mr. Meacher: No. I am not saying that. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh"] It is a matter of semantics. What I said was that we would certainly have to consider the matter again, not in terms of a fuel duty escalator, because I accept that where the international oil price is bobbing around like a cork on the sea it is absurd to put in place an escalator provision. However, it makes sense to look at the issue on a case-by-case basis, including whatever is appropriate to ensure that motorists realise the environmental externality in their costs.

In July, the Government launched a 10-year plan for transport, building on the integrated transport White Paper and delivering a £180 billion investment package to modernise the nation's transport system, to cut congestion and deliver real choice. I would point out to the House that that is a 42 per cent. increase in real terms in spending compared with the past 10 years.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Meacher: I shall give way again shortly.

The plan, which will deliver improvements across all modes of transport, is designed to tackle the legacy that we inherited of under-investment, fragmentation and short termism which have resulted from 20 years or more of neglect of our transport system.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Minister understand that what is worrying hauliers so much is that their businesses are collapsing because of unfair competition. They are looking for a level playing field. Businesses in the United Kingdom are being undermined by hauliers from continental Europe who have the advantage on them. In those circumstances, have the Government taken any initiative with the European Union to see whether in a common market it is possible to have a common approach to the level of taxation so that there is a level playing field?

Mr. Meacher: There has been consideration of what is called a "eurovignette" and there are other proposals to try to achieve that. The UK, of course, has been involved. We wish to ensure the continuing competitiveness of our haulage industry. There is a competitiveness section within the road haulage forum which is looking precisely at the facts and figures to ensure that we achieve that competitiveness. I ask the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) to wait for the Chancellor's pre-Budget report, as that is the point at which the Government will make a formal statement in answer to his perfectly fair points.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I will not give way for the moment.

In formulating our approach to transport, the Government have been very conscious—rather more so than Conservative Members—of our environmental targets. Road transport is one of the major sources of air pollution, especially in urban areas. The transport sector is also the fastest-growing source of greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change, arguably, is the biggest environmental challenge that we face globally.

That is not a trendy intellectual scenario of the middle-distance future; it is with us now. In the last few weeks, we have seen the worst flooding in Kent and Sussex in living memory. Two years ago, the east midlands experienced the worst flooding for a century. France experienced the most destructive storm of the last century which killed dozens of people and caused losses running into billions. That is paralleled by similar disasters on an even greater scale across the world. I repeat that measures to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from transport will need to play a central role in helping the UK to meet its international and domestic climate change objectives.

The real lesson of the fuel crisis, in my view, is the need for us to reduce our overdependence on oil and to switch to a greater use of renewable sources of energy. The Government have already invested in a number of measures to support the uptake of cleaner alternative fuels and technology, including low rates of duty on road fuel gases. A low rate of vehicle excise duty on electric vehicles offers significant incentives for drivers to switch.

Through my Department's powershift programme—whose budget was increased to £10 million in March—we are offering more and more grants to help those who wish to purchase gas and electric vehicles. Under the 10-year plan, the Government are committed to doubling the amount spent on cleaner vehicle initiatives by 2003–04.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am most grateful to the Minister, who is making a careful and

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reasoned case. However, will he accept that there is a world of difference between targeted measures which attack congestion and overuse of vehicles in urban areas—where there are real alternatives in terms of public transport—and the situation in rural areas where there is no alternative, where people are simply penalised and where they are the least able to pay that imposition?

Mr. Meacher: I am extremely concerned about the situation in rural areas, for which I carry a responsibility within Government. *[Interruption.]* I entirely accept that the—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but I must refer to the constant barrage of interruptions. The Minister is being generous in taking interventions. It will not help hon. Members who are seeking to catch my eye later in the debate if they continue their interruptions.

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) makes a fair point. He knows that we have begun to address this matter by spending £170 million on rural bus services, which has produced 1,800 new and improved bus services. He may dissent—and I accept that it is not enough—but it is a great improvement on what went before. If he can bear to wait for the rural White Paper, the Government will come forward with further proposals which seek in an innovative and valuable way to try to address the particular problems of rural areas.

Those fiscal measures are programmes sponsored by the Government and will increasingly make a major contribution to our climate change programme. In addition, under the voluntary agreement which, I am pleased to say, we have secured between the EC and motor manufacturers in the western world, CO_2 emissions from new cars will be reduced by no less than 25 per cent. over the next eight years. Together with changes made by the Government to company car taxation and vehicle excise duty, that is expected to produce annual savings of 4 million tonnes of carbon by 2010, which is one ninth of the target that the UK must meet.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Further to the Minister's reply to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), does he accept that in rural areas it is impossible for the excessive fuel duty increase to be passed on to customers? Will he therefore apologise to my constituent Mr. Martin Edge, who used to be president of the Road Haulage Association in Shropshire? In 1997, Mr. Edge employed 30 people, but last week he lost his business and house.

Mr. Meacher: Of course, I am sorry to hear of that case. I hope that the hon. Gentleman told his constituent the truth that the causes of the current problem go deep. They are not immediate and go back to the effects of the fuel duty escalator, which began under the previous Government and, in conjunction with other external factors, proved excessive and led to the results to which the hon. Gentleman referred. We are trying to address the matter, and the Chancellor will shortly respond with a series of measures that will begin to address the matter fundamentally.

The Government continue to reform taxation and reward those who drive cleaner, more fuel-efficient vehicles. Cleaner fuels are becoming more widespread, thanks largely to lower fuel duties, which we introduced on fuels such as ultra-low sulphur diesel and petrol and gas fuels such as liquefied petroleum gas and compressed natural gas. In addition, owners of cars with engines up to 1200cc benefited from a £55 cut in vehicle excise duties in the last Budget. More than 2 million vehicles benefited from that tax cut. From March 2001, all new cars will go into one of four bands based on their rate of CO_2 emissions. Under the new system, 95 per cent. of new cars will pay up to £70 less tax, with a total reduction of £400 million. From April 2002, company cars will be taxed on the basis of their CO_2 emissions, which should deliver savings for company car drivers choosing cars that are more fuel-efficient.

There is a clear decision to be made between the parties in this debate. In the Opposition we have a party that, during its term in office, devastated public transport in rural areas, concreted over more of the countryside than any Government before or since and abandoned the fuel duty escalator on the first whiff of populism. It is now looking to get behind what it calls a people's revolt and stir it up—that from a party that likes to see itself as the party of law and order. The Opposition are now so desperate for votes that they will promise anything—even 3p off the price of petrol—without regard to how that will be paid for or the damage that it will do to the environment.

On this side of the House, the Government have published a plan to invest £180 billion in Britain's rundown transport system, have already directed nearly £200 million into improved transport in rural areas and are determined to maintain a fair and proper balance between taxation and the needs of the countryside and the environment. The battle lines are clear, and I commend the Government amendment to the House.

4.44 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Like many other hon. Members, I too was disappointed by the speech from the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), which seemed full of rhetoric and devoid of new ideas. However, I agree entirely with the part of his speech that had to do with the absence of the Deputy Prime Minister from the Chamber today.

The Minister said in response to the comments of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells that the Deputy Prime Minister was engaged this afternoon in meetings about the closure of the west coast main line. I was advised two days ago that the Deputy Prime Minister would not attend this debate, so one of two inferences can be drawn: either the Deputy Prime Minister knew two days ago that the closures were going to happen, and therefore should have informed the House about them in his statement yesterday; or the meetings were arranged more recently, in which case time could have been set aside to enable the Deputy Prime Minister to be here for this debate.

Yesterday, the Deputy Prime Minister told the House that safety was his guiding principle. I have no doubt that, notwithstanding the arguments on either side of the fuel crisis, safety was an important feature of that crisis. If lives were not lost because of the blockades, they were certainly put at risk. If safety is the Deputy Prime Minister's top priority, he should have been here to tell the House what action the Government intended to take to ensure that lives would not be put at risk if similar blockades were imposed.

Mr. Meacher: I wish to make it clear again to the House that not only is my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister attending meetings about the closure of the west coast main line, but he is also taking part in other meetings to do with the Hatfield crash. I made that clear earlier, and the hon. Gentleman should take that information on board.

Mr. Foster: I accept entirely what the Minister says. However, my point is that it would have been possible for the Deputy Prime Minister to arrange to be in the Chamber at least for part of the debate. I, for one, regret his absence today.

However, I wish to remind the House of something else that happened yesterday, apart from the Deputy Prime Minister's statement about the Hatfield crash. For the first time in three and half years, the Prime Minister made a major speech on the environment, in which he acknowledged the explicit link between car use and climate change. He talked about the need for co-operation and leadership to press forward the green agenda, and he made it clear that time was not on our side.

The Prime Minister's speech shows that he has undergone a major conversion and demonstrates a radical shift in his thinking. If the House is not convinced, we need only look back to what was going on at the time of the fuel crisis. On 22 September, all other European countries took part in the European car-free day. Every European Government bar our own formally supported that major European initiative to draw attention to the environmental consequences of our over-reliance on the car.

The fuel crisis was a further example of the Prime Minister's welcome change of heart. Not for a minute do I wish to demean or criticise the Minister for the Environment's environmental credentials, but I wish to point out to the House that he was remarkably absent from our television screens during that crisis. Neither the Prime Minister nor any of the other Ministers who spoke during the fuel crisis at any time mentioned environmental issues in their comments.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): A year ago, the Liberal Democrat party made promises involving billions of pounds of extra expenditure, almost all of them predicated on income from fuel duty and environmental tax. Overnight, however, the party decided to suspend those promises. Is that not a little odd? The Liberal Democrat policy now is that levies on fuel would not be raised for the next five years, irrespective of whether the world price of oil is $10, $20 or $30 a barrel—what hypocrisy that is.

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I hope in a few minutes to address that very point. Whether a political party continues to believe that environmental issues are crucial but that other ways might be more appropriate to address them in the light of changing circumstances is an interesting point. That is just what we have done.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: No, I wish to make a little progress. Unlike the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells, I want to put some suggestions into the arena on how we might move forward.

During the fuel crisis, I genuinely believed that the protesters had some quite legitimate concerns, particularly those from rural areas who have no adequate public transport and no adequate alternative. The Minister told us to wait for the rural White Paper to come along and solve all these problems. However, the rural White Paper is rather like a rural bus—we wait and wait, but still it does not come along. We look forward to seeing it eventually, although we have been told it has been delayed for yet another few months.

During the entire discussion about the fuel crisis, it has been suggested that this is a simple problem that can be dealt with by simple solutions. The issue is incredibly complex, and it requires a complex solution. It must not only address environmental issues, as I argue strongly, but take into account economic issues and social justice.

We know from studies done at Lancaster university that the growing number of cars on our roads is leading to about 15 million people suffering health problems that are, at the least, aggravated by traffic fumes.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: I will in a moment.

We hear from the British Medical Association that traffic pollution causes at least 3,000 deaths a year and brings forward tens of thousands of others.

Mr. Bercow: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman, whom I hope will not impale himself too firmly on the fence. Will he confirm that tax on petrol has risen by 34 per cent. in 41 months, that that rise has been far greater than that imposed on champagne, and that those two facts represent the most damning possible indictment of the Government's priorities?

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman makes his point in his own inimitable way. I am delighted that he has as much knowledge about champagne prices as about fuel prices. I suspect that many of the people whom I represent are more concerned about fuel than champagne.

The hon. Gentleman again illustrates single-minded thinking about just one issue. We must take into account environmental as well as economic issues. We know from the Confederation of British Industry that congestion on our roads is costing British industry some £20 billion a year. As for social justice, as others have said, the poorest

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people in rural areas are suffering from what might be called transport poverty. They need to be provided with assistance as well. We must address all three factors. That is why a simplistic solution, such as the one being offered by the Conservative party, cannot be a sensible way forward.

The Conservatives are suggesting a 3p cut in the price of fuel; the protesters want a 15p cut. Let us take the middle road and consider the implications of cutting the price by 9p. It is quite simple—a typical motorist would save less than £110 a year. For a person with a 1.8 litre Ford Focus doing 10,000 miles a year at 38 miles a gallon, the saving would be £109.50.

The Tories are not proposing a cut of 9p, however—they are proposing 3p. According to calculations in a note sent to me by the Library on 11 October, the savings for the average motorist on the Conservative proposals for a 3p cut would amount to £30.50 a year, or 59p a week. That is, I suppose, slightly more than the 42p a week that they are offering pensioners.

The Tory stance on such matters is all over the place. We know that Lord Lamont introduced the fuel escalator in 1993. Despite much more recent Conservative attacks on the Government on the matter, the leaked document, which many hon. Members will have seen and which accompanied the Conservatives' May 1997 general election manifesto, stated that a Tory Government would keep the open-ended commitment to increase petrol duty. When the Tories went into the previous general election, they were in favour of keeping the escalator.

I am delighted that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) is in the Chamber. The House will recall that at the beginning of the crisis, he suggested that there should be a 5p cut in the price of petrol. However, his right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) responded by saying that it would be wrong to change policy in response to the fuel protests. Yet three days later, the shadow Chancellor himself proposed a cut of 3p per litre. The Conservatives are all over the place.

The matter is even more interesting than that. On 31 August—hon. Members should note the date—the Leader of the Opposition put out a press release through Conservative central office. It stated that he was

> calling for immediate fines on an hourly basis against individuals involved in the blockading.

The right hon. Gentleman also demanded compensation for those who had suffered financial loss and inconvenience because of the blockades.

We have noted the date. Which blockades was the right hon. Gentleman talking about? They were, of course, the French blockades. However, only a few weeks later, when it came to the English blockades, he described those who were blockading as "fine, upstanding citizens".

It is no wonder that Mr. Geoffrey Lean, in *The Independent on Sunday*, wrote:

> The Conservative policies on transport do not progress far beyond naked opportunism.

The Leader of the Opposition, who should from now on be called "Bandwagon Bill", has really demonstrated the art of jumping on bandwagons.

During Prime Minister's questions, was it not interesting to hear that rather barbed remark made by the Leader of the Opposition about his right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath)? Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition was a little bit miffed with the Father of the House. I know why. The Father of the House was too honest when he was interviewed on the "Today" programme on 3 October. He said:

> What people are saying is that he—

that is, the Leader of the Opposition—

> suddenly produces these policies out of the blue—this was certainly true of petrol—and of course then people aren't impressed.
>
> They say you are just making it up on the spur of the moment . . . That is a very dangerous technique to follow.

Mr. Redwood: Is the hon. Gentleman aware—as my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) pointed out—that the Conservative party voted against the Government's previous four big increases in petrol tax? By opposing rip-off Britain at the pumps, we are being entirely consistent. Will he take back his remarks about bandwagons? We made the bandwagon; it is an extremely democratic one and it is going to win.

Mr. Foster: I do not want to trade voting records with the right hon. Gentleman. However, if he examines them, he will find that the Liberal Democrats voted in the same way as him, but we at least had the honesty to say that the reason we did so was that we believed that any money raised from the proposed increases should be ring-fenced and used to improve support for the travelling public—not least through improved public transport.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Foster: I will not give way.

I hope that I have demonstrated that the Conservative party is all over the place with its policies and position.

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: No, I will not. I have made it clear that I will not.

The Conservative party policy is not even a popular policy. An opinion poll, carried out by NOP and quoted in the press on 6 October, found that 68 per cent. of those questioned would prefer to stick with the current fuel tax if it guaranteed less pollution and better road and rail links. That survey found that a similar proportion of people would prefer to have the 3p from fuel tax spent on green schemes for the environment than on a Tory plan to cut the price of petrol by 3p a litre. The Conservatives have come up with a simplistic solution, which does not address all aspects of the issue. Let me briefly discuss those aspects and the way forward.

The road haulage industry undoubtedly faces problems. Some of those problems come from unfair competition. The industry also has problems relating to overcapacity; it has not been said before, but it is true.

Mr. Paterson: Rubbish.

***Mr. Andrew F. Bennett** (Denton and Reddish) *rose—*

Mr. Paterson *rose—*

Mr. Foster: I give way to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett).

Mr. Bennett: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that when the road hauliers came to the House, lobbying very hard to have the axle limits increased from 38 to 44 tonnes, part of their argument was that that would improve productivity? As one cannot go on driving lorries indefinitely, in effect they have 10 per cent. oversupply of both vehicles and drivers.

Mr. Foster: I understand the hon. Gentleman's argument. Although I understand the pressures from the European Parliament on this, I was very disappointed that we went down the 44-tonne lorry route, not least because of the impact that I and many other commentators believe it will have on our ability to move more freight on to our rail system. However, the haulage industry does have a problem of unfair competition with continental operators. That problem may have been somewhat exaggerated, and many in the industry now accept that, because when one considers the totality of costs, taking into account labour costs, road tolls and other forms of taxation, it can be demonstrated that the unfairness is not quite as it was initially presented. Nevertheless, I believe that there is still a further case to be made—

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Foster: No.

I believe that that could be—

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Foster: No.

The way that I believe we should be moving—the Minister has at least given a hint that the Government might be supporting this, and it now appears to have all-party support—is to make progress on the European vignette scheme and reduce vehicle excise duty further. VED has been reduced for lorries, but it should be reduced further. At the same time, we should introduce through the vignette scheme a means whereby foreign lorries using our roads have to contribute.

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way, just on that point?

Mr. Foster: Of course I will give way to the hon. Gentleman if he insists.

Mr. Paterson: I am most grateful. Perhaps it may enlighten the hon. Gentleman if I tell him that the haulier who was trumpeted by the Government two years ago in the infamous KPMG report told me today that he moved his entire operation to Luxembourg—an operation which, thanks to the Government, is reduced from 100 trucks to 70. That haulier would be £1.5 million better off, which is the advantage in fuel duty and VED over the social costs and corporation tax in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman should have a look at some of the latest documents put out by the bodies that represent the industry—the Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association. They themselves now acknowledge that the competition argument was somewhat overplayed at the start of the debate. There will of course be individual cases; I must talk about the industry as a whole.

What is the way forward? Many things need to be done. There needs to be a massive increase in investment in public transport. It is a great shame that, during the first three years of a Labour Government, they actually spent less on public transport than their Conservative predecessors. We need increased investment in alternative fuels. Although I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement yesterday of additional funding, I must point out that, over the past three years, research into alternative forms of energy under this Government has been dramatically cut.

On the point raised by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish, the time has come to deal with the two key environmental issues that matter—namely, pollution and congestion. The time has come to make a clear commitment to cap the level of fuel duties and, for environmental reasons, to deal with the problem of congestion by supporting those local authorities that want to introduce congestion charging, provided that there has already been a significant improvement in the availability of public transport.

We also need to deal with the problem of pollution. We need to go further than the Government have done so far, although we welcome the start that they have made by linking more carefully VED with the level of pollution that is caused by a vehicle to the point at which the most fuel-efficient and pollution-reducing vehicles pay no VED at all.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I agree with several of the ideas and policies that the hon. Gentleman has introduced, including those involving congestion charges, but is it not the Liberal Democrats' policy to introduce a carbon tax? Will he explain how a carbon tax can be introduced with a five-year cap on fuel increases? Would not that introduce enormous distortions into the process? How could the system possibly work?

Mr. Foster: Given that many other hon. Members want to speak, the House would not want me to give a detailed discourse on that matter, although I am more than happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman later about it. The crucial issue involves CO_2 emissions and the other pollutants that come from vehicles. That is why we believe that the link that the Government established between VED and emissions is crucial. We should like to take the process further.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Foster: No, I shall not.

We also believe that stronger measures are required to support those in rural areas. For example, a strong case can be made for introducing rate relief for rural filling stations. There should be a specifically targeted mechanism that will help those who live in rural areas to, for example, convert to liquid petroleum gas. There should also be specific support in rural areas for alternative forms of public transport, including dial-a-ride and taxi buses. Those schemes must be eligible for the fuel duty rebate, and I look forward to the Government's

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making such an announcement. We also need to promote support for car sharing and car pooling, and we understand from leaks that the Government may well do that.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I notice that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is now present. Does he recognise that by Monday he can allow the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to help one sector of the rural economy that is greatly affected by fuel prices? It could be helped by allowing the release of agrimonetary compensation that is available, although the deadline is next week.

Mr. Foster: We all look forward to the answer that the Minister will give when he winds up the debate.

I hope that I have made it clear that this is not a simple issue and that there are no simple solutions. We need solutions that deal with the environment and the economy and that promote social justice. The knee-jerk reactions of the Conservative party—it might think that its reaction was populist—are not fully thought through, and they will not solve the real problems that concerned protesters in September.

We need a package of measures, and that is what the Liberal Democrats have offered. I am delighted that our proposals are recognised as realistic. I note, for example, that in *The Independent on Sunday*, the journalist Jo Dillon wrote:

> Conservatives have yet to produce a credible policy at all. The Liberal Democrats, as ever, have the greenest policies. It is their policies that are most likely to resolve the growing transport crisis.

Whether or not that is true, I hope that the Government and, in particular, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his forthcoming statement, will pick up on several of our positive proposals. They are not the knee-jerk reactions that we have heard from the Conservatives.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House that there will now be a 12-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

5.10 pm

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate, but I am extremely disappointed that we heard no positive policies from the Opposition—we merely had a knockabout. I understand that they like to have a go at the Government but, surely, if there really is a crisis, we should have heard something positive from them about their alternative proposals.

The Opposition said how hard pressed some farmers are. I accept that some hill farmers in particular are suffering, but what did they offer them? They said that they understood that the effect of a cut in the duty on red diesel would be insignificant. Then they talked about livestock going to market. Livestock does go to market, but not so regularly that the increase in fuel duty would significantly affect hill farmers' incomes. We need to approach the problems of the hill farmers in a different way. The fuel duty makes only a marginal difference to them.

Truckers do have problems, but there was no recognition of them from the Opposition. The basic problem for the truckers is that there are too many drivers and too many vehicles. Part of the problem is of their own making. They lobbied for much higher axle weights. They said that it would result in an improvement in productivity, and it has done so for some individuals, but it means that there is not enough work to go around.

That is not the only problem for the truckers. Britain has also seen a steady change in the amount of trucking going on. Huge amounts of coal were once taken to power stations by lorries, but most of that business has disappeared. People have gradually come to recognise that it is much better to put goods back on to the railways. For example, the construction of the second runway at Manchester airport by the filling in of the Bollin valley originally required thousands of lorryloads of limestone from the Pennines, but an extra two miles of railway were put in and it was all transported by rail.

Everyone talked about the policy of getting more trade off the roads and on to the railways, but the consequence of that is that we now have too many drivers. That is sad for someone who has become an owner-driver, mortgaging his house to do so, but such people are now in a market where there is a glut. We must look at ways in which to take some of that surplus out of the market. That will be of far more use to the drivers and the owner-drivers than reducing fuel duty because too many people are still chasing too little business.

Mr. Paterson: If the hon. Gentleman is right, why do the House of Commons figures show that, in 1997, 600,000 lorries entered Britain from the continent, and this year, 2000, it is projected that there will be 900,000?

Mr. Bennett: I accept that some extra lorries are coming from Europe, but in almost every European country the balance of trade is in our favour. It may be that we should be trying at least to protect our trade. The Opposition could have come up with some proposals, but they have not done so today. There are many arguments in favour of the introduction of a Brit disc. We need to look at some positive measures, and the first would be to reduce the number of truckers in an over-supplied market.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I speak as someone who did once run trucks: if one reduces the capacity of the industry haulage freight costs will be forced up.

Mr. Bennett: I accept that haulage costs will be forced up, but the basic problem is one of too many people looking for the business. That is why so many of them are going out of business. That has nothing to do with fuel charges.

I accept that my constituents find the fuel duty increase burdensome, but most could change their behaviour to meet the difference created by the tax. First, far more of them could simply observe the speed limits. In areas such as mine, considerable sums are being spent on installing traffic calming measures because people drive far too fast. If they drove more slowly, their cars would work more

efficiently and it would be far better for our attack on the problems of global warming if people behaved more sensibly.

In Opposition contributions to the debate, there has been no recognition of the problems of global warming.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bennett: No, I have a limited amount of time.

The Opposition must recognise that global warming is a major problem. If we are to tackle it, we must all use transport less. It would be far better for us to do that now than to have to spend huge sums of money on increasing coastal defences, dealing with flooding and so on. Gradually, my constituents are accepting that message. They all say to me that, if we must use motor cars less and if we must transport goods less to deal with global warming, we need better public transport now.

I am delighted that the Government have given the go-ahead in Greater Manchester for the new metro system to be expanded. They should be commended for that, but I plead with them to consider a few more points while the Transport Bill is going through the House of Lords.

First, there is the relationship between the local transport plans and the Strategic Rail Authority. I hope that the Government will consider giving a higher priority to the local plans, to allow some balance in bargaining. In my constituency, there is a conflict about the priority that should be given to people getting from Newcastle to Liverpool or simply from Guide Bridge to Fairfield. It involves the use of the same bits of track for one purpose or the other.

My next point concerns bus lanes. In much of Greater Manchester, there will not be trams. Bus lanes will work if people see the buses getting to their destination more quickly than cars, but it is important that, when we get the bus lanes in place, contracts can be let so that we have bus operators competing for the contract, rather than buses competing down the bus lane for the business. Again, in the legislation that is going through the other place, the Government could achieve a better balance.

Finally, we need to encourage one system in this country for people to pay their fares. On buses, a huge amount of time is wasted while the driver collects the fares. In most European cities, a carnet or similar system is used so that people can get on and off buses quickly, without having to slow down the entire process to pay their fares.

My plea to the Government is that they should re-examine one or two of the measures in the Transport Bill and get on with the commitment to get good public transport in place, so that we can reduce our dependence on carbon fossil fuels and make a real contribution to reducing the risk of global warming.

5.18 pm

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I have declared my interests in the Register of Members' Interests, but perhaps I should remind the House of one interest that I share with the Deputy Prime Minister: both he and I are Jaguar drivers. There is, of course, a very big difference. I have to pay for all my own fuel, whereas the Deputy Prime Minister, I believe, often has his fuel bought for him by the taxpayer.

One of the most worrying aspects of this unpleasant saga is how out of touch the Government have become in such a short time. It is not as though we failed to warn them. On many occasions, the Opposition have brought to the House the democratic cases for lower fuel taxation and for more justice for road haulage industry participants, for farmers and for the many other people who need diesel and petrol to go about their daily business.

I remember attending a Treasury Question Time long before the protests built up on streets. I asked the Chancellor the simple question: what was the price of a litre of petrol, and how much of that was tax? The Chancellor could answer neither part of the question, so out of touch was the man who had just massively increased taxes in the Budget. He did not even know that the tax was so high.

The Government have increased the tax by 34 per cent.; they increased diesel tax by 12 per cent. in one go. They ignored the advice of the Conservative Opposition that the fuel escalator was high enough. They not only stayed on the escalator, but decided to invent another, with an even sharper ascent so that even more hauliers could be driven out of business more quickly, and more people could be driven into fuel poverty on the forecourt, by the pump.

Mr. Bercow: What change of behaviour does my right hon. Friend believe that the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) expects from my 83-year-old, law-abiding constituent, who lives in the heart of rural Buckingham and undertakes journeys to outlying villages to perform her charity work, and is savagely clobbered by the Administration?

Mr. Redwood: The Government seem to believe that poor people have no right to drive a car. It is obvious that they will drive poor people off the roads before those on better salaries. The Government are perpetrating highway robbery without the charisma of Dick Turpin or the good intentions of Robin Hood. We are considering a pariah Government, who rob the poor to give to the rich. Indeed, they give to the super-rich; they give to themselves, and to the Treasury, which has more money than it knows what to do with, and more than it budgeted to receive. The Chancellor is about to make a statement to explain that he got all his Budget figures wrong earlier this year, and that he has a bigger surplus than planned.

The Labour party and the Liberal Democrats ask how the Conservative party would afford the cut in taxes on motorists and the haulage industry. It is easy. The windfall that the Government are receiving is huge; it is bringing in far more money than the Chancellor budgeted for only a few months ago. We do not even recommend returning all the windfall because my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), the shadow Chancellor, is such a prudent and cautious man. However, we recommend giving some of it back because it is taxpayers' money. The Government's intention to pocket all the unexpected windfall money is a rip-off.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Redwood: I must press on, because I want to make several points. The Government have made their case often, and have presented many foolish arguments. I shall deal with some of them.

[Mr. Redwood]

We heard briefly from the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry during the crisis. He said that, if we cut taxes now, there would not be enough money for schools and hospitals. That is entirely false. No supplementary Budget has been produced to give more money to schools and hospitals since the windfall petrol tax money started to come in. We all know that the money will not be spent on schools and hospitals. If the Government wanted to spend more money on them, they would have had to announce more spending to the House because they had not planned to obtain the windfall tax.

We were told that the Government could not change Budgets during the course of a year. Yet the summer supplementary estimates show that the Government changed their Budget plans not so long ago. They increased spending not on schools and hospitals but on all sorts of other items of public expenditure from the Export Credits Guarantee Department to Inland Revenue administration costs. They regularly change their Budget plans, as previous Governments have done, during the year. However, when it comes to a just change, for which the public is hungry, to give back some of our money, which the Government should not have taken and had not planned to take, they are strangely silent, wooden, and unable to change their mind or make an adjustment.

I do not urge the Chancellor to be imprudent or incautious with the family silver or with our money. However, if he is such a stickler for his Budget judgment, he should try to return to it. My constituents and I would now settle for the amount of tax that the Government were planning to take from motorists in the previous Budget. At the time, I believed that it was far too much, and I argued against it. My hon. Friends and I voted against it. However, we would now settle for that amount, which the Chancellor would have robbed from us, because the windfall means that he will take up to £4,000 million a year extra than those high Budget amounts.

We are then told—

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House where he thinks that the windfall is coming from? There is not, as some have suggested, a value added tax windfall, for example. VAT receipts are pretty much on track with the Budget projection.

Mr. Redwood: The figure of up to £4,000 million comes from independent accountants and it may be an overestimate. However, a large sum is coming, primarily from petroleum revenue tax and other taxes that are levied upon those bringing oil from the North sea. A huge windfall will come directly from the price of oil. It will come also from VAT. The Minister might like to check past statements on the wonderful machinery within the Treasury. He will discover that even the Prime Minister has admitted that the Government are receiving more money from VAT than they were expecting, and that quite a bit of that extra VAT receipt will come from petrol and oil products.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): In response to the Minister's intervention, let me say that it is the Inland Revenue that has confirmed the windfall from petroleum revenue tax.

Mr. Redwood: It is a bit rich if a Treasury Minister does not know that the Inland Revenue has made that confession. I am delighted that we are getting some value from all the extra money in administrative costs that the Government voted through in the summer supplementary estimates for the Inland Revenue.

Mr. Timms: VAT is collected by Customs and Excise. As I have made clear, there is no significant variation in VAT receipts from those projected at the time of the Budget.

Mr. Redwood: That was a carefully worded intervention. The hon. Gentleman seems to be conceding that there will be a large windfall from PRT and taxes on the oil companies. I look forward to seeing shortly the statement from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I think that those commentators who are predicting that there will be a large increase in revenues compared with the Budget forecasts in May are right, and that much of that will be from the motorist or from the haulage industry. I suspect that we shall see another shortfall in spending of the sort that the Government have regularly recorded year by year but have tried to suppress.

There is no Budget case for hanging on to the money. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, taxation is bankrupting the haulage industry. It is not driving lorries off the road because it is swapping the business from British hauliers to French, Belgian, Italian and Spanish hauliers. Is that what the Minister wants? I thought that he was a British Minister in a British Government. He should stand up for the British haulage industry.

Why are the Government so dilatory in introducing the Brit disc, which the Conservative party suggested a long time ago? We think that we should charge foreign lorry operators more for using our roads and cluttering them, and charge British lorry operators rather less so that they have more chance of competing fairly. I see the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) nodding in agreement. He has run a haulage business, or has been involved with one. He knows that what I say is true. We are not being fair to the British haulage industry.

In many rural areas, there are no bus services or train services that people can use, so that they might leave their car at home. The Government have done nothing to change that position. Many of my constituents in a suburban area get up every morning and draw back the curtains to see whether the integrated transport policy has yet arrived. They find that there is still no bus stop within a mile. There is still no train station within 5 or 10 miles. They have no choice. They must use their car, van or lorry to get about or to go about their business. It is high time that the Government understood that and did not tax people into oblivion for doing what they need to do because there is no proper alternative.

The Government have cruelly let down the motorist. They are now penalising him or her by their failure to get up and running an integrated transport strategy that would provide the motorist with a decent alternative. The Government decided to penalise the British haulage industry to help the foreign haulage industry. The Government decided to tax the poor off the road so that the rich and those in government can travel with fewer people getting in the way.

The Deputy Prime Minister, who unfortunately is not in the Chamber, once memorably said that he would fail if he did not reduce the amount of traffic on the roads.

We now discover that the only way that he has of doing that is to so anger British motorists and lorry drivers that he drives them off the road because he has driven them out of fuel.

I hold the Government responsible. When I went along the queues at the last remaining open petrol station in my constituency during the dispute, everyone told me, inconvenienced as he or she was, that the blame rested with the Government and not with the protesters. The Government should listen. They should understand that there is a strong democratic movement outside the House. They should understand also that the Opposition speak for the overwhelming majority of the nation when we say to the Chancellor, "Get these taxes down now. It is our money and we want it back. It is a rip-off. You do not need the windfall."

5.30 pm

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): It is rich for the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) to talk about defenders of democracy.

I want to concentrate on the politics of what happened a few weeks ago and to address the subject of the debate. Is the cost of petrol and diesel too high? Yes, and no one thinks that that is good for the economy. The question is how we can reduce the cost of fuel. It cannot be done simply through the fuel tax levy. The tripling of oil prices cannot be ignored. A few weeks ago, the Opposition promised to take 3p off a litre of fuel, but the cost of fuel has increased by almost that amount since then. Conservatives and free marketeers should know that the price of anything, including diesel and petrol, is determined by the price that the market is prepared to pay.

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hood: No, I shall not give way, because a lot of Back Benchers want to contribute to the debate.

I do not accept that a cut in the fuel tax levy would automatically reduce the price of fuel. What would there be to stop the oil companies making more profit? There are great problems in the road haulage industry, but they are not caused just by the fuel tax levy. As the Minister said, there is a combination of factors.

Road hauliers suffer from the actions of their colleagues in the road haulage industry, because the big road hauliers cut the throats of the small companies. Many small road haulage businesses in my constituency are in trouble, usually as a result of the cut-throat approach of a lot of the big road hauliers who run the industry through the Road Haulage Association. The big road hauliers—not the small business man, whose interests I thought the Conservatives claimed to represent—benefit more from what the association suggests.

I want to talk not only about the many single-driver businesses in the road haulage industry but about the thousands of people who are employed as drivers. Many drivers in my constituency who are in the road haulage industry work 60, 70 or 80 hours a week. A constituent came to me last week whose husband works 70 hours a week driving a coal truck, but qualifies for working families tax credit. There are problems, but not just for those who run businesses within the road haulage industry. The industry has the problem of providing good terms and conditions for its work force. We should not ignore that.

I have been a Member of this place for 13 years. Over the past few years, we have debated how to improve our democracy, and that debate continues. We must take account of what happened a few weeks ago. We must be careful to protect our democracy. What I saw in our country a few weeks ago was far from democratic. I was criticised for making the fair point that, as a miner for 23 years, in 1984–85, when I was on strike fighting for my job and to save my community, I was treated a wee bit differently from the protesters in 2000. That has to be questioned.

The Road Haulage Association was faxing, e-mailing and telephoning its members in my constituency days before the protests. It sent people to the demonstrations and protests. To say that the event was spontaneous is just a bit rich, and I do not accept it.

The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman)—I paraphrase—referred to the Prime Minister's immortal words, "Things will be getting back to normal in 24 hours". Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, in a sense—I was ill during those few days, and was at home watching everything live on Sky television. As I saw it all unfold, I was worried about what I saw. The Prime Minister met oil companies and the police, and then made his statement about things getting back to normal within 24 hours. In fact, within 24 hours not only were things not getting back to normal; they seemed to be getting increasingly worse.

On the Wednesday of that week, the Prime Minister had another meeting with the oil companies and the police. Within hours of that meeting, the protest was being called off. It is in that context that I raise my point about the defence of democracy, and the need to ask how we, as a Parliament, can defend it.

If what happened was a spontaneous act—a popular uprising which happened just like that, and was called off just like that, as it was—questions must be asked. What led to its being called off? I do not know whether the Prime Minister will be able to tell us for 30 years about the conversation that took place in Downing street, but I am certainly worried about it.

A Member of Parliament, the late Norman Buchan, told me when I arrived as a new Member, "Jimmy, always suspect a conspiracy until proven different". That was good advice. I am not persuaded by apparent coincidences such as the one I have mentioned. Questions must be asked about the way in which things were happening—and not just in this country. The protest began in France, came to the United Kingdom and then went to Belgium, Germany, Italy and Holland, in that order. We have been told by those who organised it here that they wanted parity in Europe.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hood: To the hon. Gentleman, I will.

Mr. Winterton: May I give an answer to the question that the hon. Gentleman has just posed rhetorically? I believe that the hauliers and farmers—who were widely supported—wanted to make a point that they could not make other than by means of a blockade. Once the blockade had shown itself to be successful, they immediately called it off because they did not want to

[Mr. Winterton]

inconvenience the people of this country any further, or to cause dire emergencies in the health service and other essential services.

Mr. Hood: That is a rather favourable view from the hon. Gentleman, whose opinions I normally respect.

Questions must certainly be asked about the oil companies. We in Scotland were being fed information by the media, including television. In Grangemouth protesters arrived 24 hours before the protest started, and were given accommodation by guess who—the refinery. They were even given showering facilities in case they became a bit warm and dusty during the day. I suspect that the police were taking them flasks and sandwiches. There was such a wonderful, sweetheart relationship. That was not my experience in 1984.

Mr. Ottaway: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hood: I am sorry; I will not give way because I shall finish soon.

In discussing what happened only a few weeks ago, it is not right for hon. Members to describe themselves as democrats and then condone in any way, shape or form the blockading of our refineries. Those hon. Members who believe that the protest was a coincidence and a popular uprising should consider that the SAS—the best trained troops in the world—took four or five weeks to prepare and effect the rescue of five of our soldiers who were held hostage in Sierra Leone. If it takes the best trained armed forces in the world five weeks to rescue five men in Sierra Leone, hon. Members should not try to kid me that a lot of organisation was not done behind the scenes by certain faceless, unrepresentative people. That is what I fear most about the protests.

The Government must, and will, react to the situation in the industry, and we shall hear more about that in the coming days and weeks. Hon. Members on both sides of the House should think carefully about what happened in our country a few weeks ago; it is very dangerous for anyone to condone what we all saw.

5.41 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood) and am grateful to him for having given way to me. I am sorry that he did not take my response to his rhetorical question more seriously because I genuinely believe that several organisations, representing hauliers, farmers and people living in rural areas, were so unhappy about the fact that the Government were apparently not prepared to listen to their genuine grievances that they felt they had to take the action that they did. However, they took it for only the length of time needed to impress the Government with the validity of their case, and they ceased their action before it became a serious embarrassment to the emergency services, the health service, other essential services and people's employment. My intervention was genuine and sincere. The concern is that the Government have not been listening.

The hon. Member for Clydesdale and I spent time together at Catterick camp not many moons ago, and we got to know each other better than we have done in the House. We respect each other for the roles that we play here. That is what the House is about: it is a matter not just of Government versus Opposition but of Members understanding the role that they play individually. I believe that the hon. Gentleman understands my position.

There is a serious problem in rural areas. If the hon. Gentleman were to visit villages such as Wincle, Wildboarclough, Rainow, Kettleshulme and Higher Poynton in my constituency, he would see areas where there is little or no public transport. There is no metro—I am delighted that the metro is expanding in Greater Manchester—and the only public transport is a bus or two a day—if that. The buses generally come at inconvenient times. The people who live in those remote rural areas and villages could not possibly have an acceptable quality of life without the use of their own cars.

Mr. Efford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Winterton: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman because he is a good colleague and serves on my Committee.

Mr. Efford: The hon. Gentleman is making the case for rural drivers, but I wonder whether he made it when the fuel duty escalator was introduced. Between 1992 and 1997, the then Government raised an extra £5 billion. The hon. Gentleman will know that because it is the answer to the question that he tabled in 1998. What was he doing then for rural drivers, and to provide alternative benefits to people who use the roads?

Mr. Winterton: I can reply with some emphasis because, as my party in government knew well, I was voting against them more often than not. In fact, I think that I registered my first objection and vote against an increase in fuel prices way back in 1981. I have been registering my concern ever since. The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) remembers my intervention. I am sorry that I was not listened to then. I have often not been listened to in this place, but there have been occasions when—I say it with some regret—I have been right and the Government of the day have been wrong.

In rural areas, there is poverty and there are people on very low incomes. To live to a reasonable standard and quality of life, those people need their car. The recent blanket policy of increasing fuel prices has been extremely detrimental to their ability to lead the standard of life that many of us expect.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) rightly referred to Manchester airport and the extra rail link, which I supported, to take stone from the Derbyshire quarries to the second runway. It was particularly necessary because, as the hon. Gentleman knows—he is very knowledgeable about these matters—the A6, along which most of that aggregate would have travelled, goes through the villages of Disley and Newtown in my constituency and would have been totally unable to cope with that volume and weight of commercial traffic. It was for that reason that we had an extra length of rail line put in, but, in many rural areas, we do not have the regular public transport that people in urban areas take for granted. I fully support the metro.

I want it to be extended to many other areas of Greater Manchester, but we cannot overlook the position of people who live in rural areas.

I have some first-class road hauliers of international renown in my constituency. I refer to R. H. Stevens, Bell Transport, Whittakers Transport, Kirk's of Poynton and Swains of Poynton. They have the best quality wagons, maintain them to the highest possible degree and pay their drivers good wages. They are finding it extremely difficult to compete, particularly with companies that come in from the European Community. The Government must look at that.

I fully support the limited proposals—they are only limited—that have emanated from Her Majesty's Opposition. I support what we have said on reducing the price of fuel by 3p per litre. The figure is rather more if taken in relation to a gallon.

I am not making a special plea for myself. All right, I have a Range Rover. I am proud of having one. It is top of the range. I use it quite frequently to come with my wife to London—two of us, by the way, travelling in one car, for which I get one allowance. The allowance is very modest if we compare it with that which I would get as a Member of Parliament travelling first class from London to Macclesfield and from Macclesfield to London. I am saving the taxpayer a lot of money, but we do it because it can be done in the same time as travelling by rail. We are able to bring provisions and other things to our flat. We do not have to take taxis from my home to the station and from the station to the House of Commons, so there is good purpose, but I make a loss on every mile that I cover on parliamentary and constituency duties because of a decision that the House took two or three years ago. I deeply regret that.

Let us understand that rural areas are vital. If we want to depopulate them, we can do so by continuing along the present path. I know that the Government are giving some support to the development of alternative fuels such as liquid gas. If I can continue to afford to run my Range Rover in the future, I should be interested in using liquid gas instead of petrol. What support are the Government giving to the development of the fuel cell, which is an important source of energy for vehicles?

Do the Government realise that everything that is in our superstores, whether they are in town or in out-of-town shopping complexes, has to be delivered by vehicle? There is no other way in which all the goods that people want and demand in their shops can be delivered. If the price of running a vehicle is high, it will affect the price of the goods in the shops. There is so much to be taken into account in this debate. I sometimes feel that debates across the Chamber on critical subjects affecting all our constituents are sterile and too often about scoring political points.

Let us look at this matter. Transport is vital. We cannot deny people the right to be mobile as part of their job and way of life. Surely we must have a fair tax system. At the moment, that tax system is grossly unfair and weighs particularly heavily on those who are least able to pay. Let us deal with this debate seriously—I ask the House and the Government to do so.

5.52 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): It is always a great pleasure to follow my honourable neighbour, the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), a fellow Cheshire Member. I appreciate the sincerity with which he put his case—and the occasion on which he gave me a lift in his 4.2 litre Range Rover.

I want to explain to the House what happened on the night of 7 September at Stanlow refinery in my constituency—and I hope that hon. Members will listen to my observations and refrain from some of the silly language that has been used during parts of the debate.

Stanlow is a major hazard site to which unimpeded access for emergency vehicles 24 hours a day is vital. The smallest incident at that refinery must, if necessary, be able to be dealt with by the full resources of the north-west fire brigade—including units from further away than the constituency of the hon. Member for Macclesfield. The emergency services need that access in case an incident turns out to be serious.

A few minutes after 10 o'clock on 7 September the refinery was blockaded, and the main oil terminal entrances were physically blocked. That is intolerable as it puts my constituents at physical risk. That is not an acceptable way to conduct a dispute, whatever the rights and wrongs of the issue.

I noticed that in a press report in the Essex *Evening Gazette* the shadow Transport spokesman's office explained that

> They were informed by hauliers that the protest would start this week.

In other words, the shadow Transport spokesman had prior notice of the incidents that were to take place in my constituency and put my constituents at risk. When reading the report of my speech, I hope that he will consider that next time he might have the good grace to tell me, so that I can inform the police and the relevant authorities because of the major safety issues involved.

Intimidation has been mentioned, and there was intimidation. A total of 185 incidents have been collated across the country. They were gathered—*[Interruption.]* Does the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) wish to intervene?

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I apologise for intervening from a sedentary position. I was simply saying that there was prompting from the Government because the Government asked the oil companies to find out. The incidents were not reported to the police. If they had been genuine, they would have been reported at the start.

Mr. Miller: I made a rather angry intervention on the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman). I accept that he knows more than I do about running a supermarket, but I suspect that I know more about cracking oil—and the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border knows a little as well.

It is important to understand the safety culture that surrounds those drivers. Quite rightly, under successive Governments safety standards in the oil industry have been driven higher and higher.

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Miller: No, I will not give way.

That is commendable action by the industry and it needs to continue. In one incident a driver was boxed in with a white van at either end of his vehicle, and was

[Mr. Miller]

prevented from proceeding. Is the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border saying that that is not intimidation? Is he saying that the leader of the protest, whom I met at about 3 o'clock in the morning on 8 September, was not being intimidating? I can read from my notes of that meeting—the only notes that exist. The leader of the protest said:

> Our only objective is to stop all fuel getting out of the plant . . . If the riot police move on us tonight, what happened in France will seem like a picnic. I do not care if Stanlow blows up.

Those may be the words of an angry man, but that is not acceptable, and it is intimidation. I wrote to the Leader of the Opposition with my observations and asked him whether he thought that people making such comments were fine upstanding citizens. He ducked the question, saying:

> Both police and independent commentators have confirmed that the protests were largely peaceful.

His language was beginning to shift. He went on:

> However, on several occasions I made it clear that those organising the blockades should call them off and instead make their protests through the ballot box.

Despite the fact that the shadow Transport spokesman knew about the protest and must have known about the serious risk to my constituents, and despite the fact that it was apparently the view of the Leader of the Opposition on 13 September that people should withdraw, he did not bother to tell the Leader of the Opposition what was going on. Such protests are entirely unacceptable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood) advanced an interesting conspiracy theory. I, too, recall the late Norman Buchan—and I know some of his poetry, but I shall not recite it just now. I believe that it is not possible to advance the conspiracy theory too far. The simple fact is that the road being blockaded at Stanlow was a private road. Unfortunately, it belonged not to the Shell oil company but to the Manchester Ship Canal company. At 3 o'clock in the morning it was extremely difficult for the police to find any basis in law on which to act. They eventually did act on the basis of the issues that I have mentioned, and the physical blockade was lifted.

I have seen some splits in my time. I have seen some splits in my party, and I have certainly seen some splits in the Conservative party—but what is clear is the lack of cohesion among the representatives of the farming and haulage industries. When I told the gentlemen leading the fuel protests, whom I met on the night in question, that I had had discussions with the regional officer of the National Farmers Union in Cheshire about some of the issues, they said, "NFU—do you know what those letters stand for?" I shall not say what they said it stood for. Similar remarks were made about the Road Haulage Association.

The Treasury cannot have a rational debate with a disorganised group. There has to be a proper co-ordinated structure. I do not deny that hauliers and farmers have issues that are worthy of raising, but I urge them to raise those issues through the proper channels of the Road Haulage Association, the National Farmers Union and other existing structures.

I tell my right hon. Friend the Minister that the Government will have to address both short and long-term issues. The main short-term issue is how we should respond to rocketing crude oil prices. Just the other day, my domestic fuel tank was filled. Thanks to the Government, there was no VAT or fuel duty on that fuel. Nevertheless, because of the huge increase in the price of crude oil, the price of that domestic fuel has increased from 11p to 24p per litre in the past year.

Something has to be done in the short term. I ask the Government to consider carefully what can be done to continue downward pressure on vehicle excise duty. Such action would ensure that car ownership was not penalised, but it would not remove the pressure on those who drive excessive mileage. The fact that VED is a difficult tax to police, and is evaded by many domestic motorists and hauliers, also suggests that it should be reduced significantly. Additionally, deals could probably be done involving emissions reductions in exchange for vehicle excise duty reductions.

Technology—fuel cells and battery power have already been mentioned in the debate—offers some possible longer-term solutions. As technology advances and the nature of power transmission changes, we will be better able to decide where to find the funds necessary to support our road and other transport infrastructure. People in rural areas who tele-work from home also can benefit from a new strategy.

Today, we are trying to address an immensely complicated issue in a very short debate—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Members think that the issue is simple. I tell the House that we should get away from direct conflict, which does not assist the debate. As the hon. Member for Macclesfield said, we should get round the negotiating table, to find both short and long-term solutions that serve the interests of all our citizens.

6.4 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): I shall keep my comments short because I know that other hon. Members wish to speak.

As my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, despite the rhetoric that we have heard from the Government in the past few months, the facts are clear: the Library produced the figures showing that the price of fuel, in extra duty and VAT, has increased massively since this Government were elected. The general public do not see diesel and petrol prices in terms of percentage increases in tax as a proportion of the total price, they simply see increase after increase, tax after tax. They have become ever more frustrated at the Government's inability to handle the situation, and they want the Government to admit at last that they have made mistakes.

The Government have told the public—they told us again today—that the increases are due to the price of oil, the need to put money back into the economy and the need to save the environment, the NHS and the transport network itself. I dread to think what would happen if the Deputy Prime Minister's dream of reducing traffic congestion came true. If the Government had achieved those goals, the economy and our vital services would have ground to a halt.

I think that we all accept that the price of oil has increased greatly. However, that fact only makes the Government's spurious remarks about public services, deficits and jobs more ridiculous. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said that by the end of August the increase in the cost of oil had already netted the Chancellor £930 million.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said, under Labour petrol tax has increased while public services have been getting worse. If the Government want to link fuel duty and public services, they have to explain why they have given British motorists the highest petrol prices in Europe while at the same time allowing the waiting list to see a consultant to increase by almost 200,000, class sizes in our schools to increase, police numbers to decrease by 3,000, and roads in Britain to deteriorate to their worst condition in 26 years.

If the Government are really prioritising hospital spending, why do they continue to charge fuel tax on NHS vehicles? Last year, £18.5 million of the NHS budget was clawed back by the Treasury in fuel tax on ambulances and other medical vehicles. What Labour gives with one hand, it takes back with the other. Treasury Ministers might ask themselves how many hip operations or junior doctors that money could have paid for.

We are debating an important subject. During the recess I was contacted by hauliers in my constituency, as other hon. Members were in theirs, and I spent some time talking and listening to them. It is a sad situation. They told me that their livelihoods were being destroyed, and their industry was becoming fiercely uncompetitive. They are at their wits' end. They also told me that no one listens to them. At least I listened. I also gave them my assurance that I would push the Government for answers to the questions that so many of them asked about fuel taxes in Britain.

Hauliers in my constituency told me that they hoped that the Government would not do deals in smoke-filled rooms with the oil companies just to get themselves off the hook of possible future protests. Hauliers want real solutions to real problems, and a long-term plan to ensure that our haulage industry can get back on the road. The facts are that the price of fuel duty is too high, that the Government can afford to reduce it, and that, as my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, the haulage industry is on its knees.

Fuel is a vital commodity to my constituents. They use their cars not as a luxury item but to get to work and to the shops, and to get their children to school. They are not impressed by the Government's tired rhetoric or the way in which they continually pass the buck. My postbag, like that of many of my colleagues, has demonstrated the breadth and depth of concern about fuel prices. The view in my constituency is that enough is enough.

A disabled driver in my constituency sent me a copy of a letter that he has written to the Deputy Prime Minister. He wrote:

> As a result of this government's policies, many people are trapped in rural areas, with no alternative to the "infernal" combustion engine. You call tax on fuel "indirect tax". You are wrong. When there is no alternative, such a tax becomes very direct and very painful.

The concern expressed in that letter is being echoed across the country.

Another constituent wrote:

> I am willing to add my voice to the thousands of others protesting about the unacceptable price of fuel in this country. The general public . . . have complete solidarity with the activists because we all know that we are being bled dry in this country by indirect taxation. Is the Government trying to kill off what's left of our industry?

I have passed that correspondence to Ministers, and I await their reply. How does the Minister respond to my constituent who sums up the Prime Minister's response to public outrage at the high level of tax in Europe as

> pay my price for petrol or walk . . . ?

My constituent continues:

> Marie Antoinette took a similar view when the price of bread became unaffordable, and we all know what happened to her.

My constituents will not be impressed by the Government's failure to put forward a senior Minister to answer our and their concerns. They will not be impressed by the Government's stubborn refusal to reduce taxes despite their electoral promises, nor by the fact that the Government are blaming everyone but themselves for a problem that is of their own making.

The Government can call on the police for support. They can call on the armed forces to force through fuel supplies. They can call on motorists to leave their cars at home and struggle to work and school on inadequate public transport—but when the time comes for a general election, the public will have the last call on the Government.

6.10 pm

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): Let me say first that I disagree whole-heartedly with the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). I consider hon. Members' car allowances to be extremely generous and I would willingly see them cut if it would encourage hon. Members to use smaller vehicles that are more fuel efficient.

I am surprised that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) is willing to tolerate the bully-boy tactics that resulted in cancelled operations and radiotherapy and losses for business in my constituency. It even provoked the comment from the brother of Brinley Williams, one of the protagonists in the campaign, that he had lost a considerable amount of money. He accused his brother of playground bullying.

My constituency is a large rural area and it has not taken recent events to make me aware of the concerns of many of my constituents who rely heavily on their cars to gain access to essential services. It is an issue that I have been raising with Ministers for the past three and a half years, unlike the Opposition, who have pursued one course in office and another out of office.

Although the Opposition may wish to focus the debate on fuel taxation, a glance at the other underlying issues will show that it is precisely because of their action, or in many cases lack of action, that the United Kingdom faced the problems it did during the protests in September.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Lawrence: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to make his own speech. He has intervened many times and I have only 12 minutes.

It is important to look at the underlying issues. They include the declining world oil supplies and the failure of former UK Governments to plan for that decline; the level of continued dependence on fossil fuels and the failure of past UK Governments to invest in alternative energy supplies and to recognise the need to support essential

[Mrs. Lawrence]

services in rural areas so that people are now more than ever dependent on transport to reach those essential services.

In Pembrokeshire we have two oil refineries, one in my constituency. They were both affected by the blockades in September when protesters held the country to ransom. Other specific issues highlighted at the time included emergency planning, the role of the oil companies in recent events—I shall turn to those in a moment in relation to the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood)—the implications of changes by the previous Tory Government in 1992 to the oil warehousing regulations and whether we are prepared to allow a group of bully boys, however noble they see their cause, holding the country to ransom without any comprehension of the damage that they have caused to others in society.

In relation to dependence on oil, during the protests I received an e-mail from a group of oil experts and academics pointing out that by 2009—only nine years away—it is estimated that world demand for oil will exceed supply. If that is correct, it is inevitable by the very nature of supply and demand economics that oil prices will escalate. That brings me to my second point: the failure of the previous British Government to invest in alternative sources of energy and renewables in particular.

I recently returned from a trip to Denmark with the parliamentary renewable and sustainable energy group. Denmark has a commitment to renewable energy and has already met its target for energy production from renewable sources of 1,500 MW by 2005. The UK is producing only 350 MW from renewable sources.

Until recently, electricity generators were unable to produce energy from wind turbines economically—due, regrettably, to the unfortunate lack of action on the part of the previous Government—unless they applied for sites with wind velocity of between 8.5 and 9 m per second. This put pressure for sites in some of the most wild and beautiful locations in the UK and resulted in 89 per cent. of such applications being refused by planning authorities. The previous Government failed to address the issue.

Only now has the system changed and I am told that energy generation would be viable from sites with wind velocity of 7 m per second. This opens up the possibility of development on redundant and auxiliary power station sites currently not used. These are mainly in industrial settings and do not threaten our wild and beautiful areas. A conversation I had with a representative from National Wind Power on my recent visit to Denmark indicated that this could open up a further 1,000 MW of wind turbine production. Those issues are crucial to the debate and show the extent to which the Opposition, when in government, let the people of the United Kingdom down.

My constituents depend heavily on their cars. In many instances this can be traced back to the action, or lack of action, by the previous Government to support rural dwellers. We have already heard that by 1997 only one in four parishes in rural areas had a daily bus service. The previous Government closed 30 rural schools a year and 3,000 post offices while they were in office. I recall from my own experience as a member of the Dyfed-Powys police authority the closure of rural police stations and the refusal of the previous Government to allow our local police authority to increase the number of officers. The introduction of market forces into health services meant increased centralisation as a result of funding pressures and led to the need for rural dwellers to travel to reach those services.

Fuel taxation—which the Opposition have tried to concentrate on this afternoon—is high and we are faced with a dilemma. I want my constituents to be able to access the services that they need, but we must also have a mind to future generations. If we fail to do that, we are not behaving responsibly.

In 1997 the Tories said on page 386 of their campaign guide:

> Fuel duty has been progressively increased since the November 1993 Budget to help fulfil our commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000. Road fuel duties were increased in both 1995 and 1996 in line with the Government's strategy of annual increases averaging at least 5 per cent.

Why have they suddenly shifted to irresponsibility? It smacks of sitting on the fence and facing both ways depending on which audience they are talking to. Surely the responsible approach to the dilemma of fuel taxation is to use the taxation to restore services in rural areas, to invest in alternative fuels and vehicle technology, to reinvest in renewable energy to meet the future needs of British industry and to target motoring tax breaks at essential car users, such as those in rural areas.

It is also interesting that the Conservative party website refers to fuel prices in Denmark and Holland as being 73p and 75p respectively. I have visited both countries in the past few weeks. Those are indeed the fuel prices, but the Conservative website does not mention that in Denmark income tax starts at 50 per cent. and increases to 75 per cent. while in Holland it starts at 40 per cent. and increases to 55 per cent. That compares with a starting rate of 10p and a standard rate of 22p in the UK.

I now turn to the protests in September and their impact on my local area. The staff at the Elf refinery in Milford Haven were quick thinking and coped extremely well with what could have been a serious safety problem. I cannot praise them enough. Although I have only praise for the local refinery employees, I question the role of the oil companies as multinational organisations in these events. Had it been a trade union dispute, I am sure that there would have been no question of protesters using refinery facilities such as canteens, showers and toilets. I was interested to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Clydesdale that the same happened elsewhere.

Indeed, when I visited the refinery at the time of the dispute there was a line of Portaloos on the grass verge outside the refinery for the use of the protesters. That is hardly an indication of a spontaneous protest. It is also interesting to note that on 20 September the *Evening Gazette* reported that the wife of the Opposition Transport spokesman explained that they were away on holiday because they had been informed by hauliers that the protest would take place the following week and they had planned to be back by then. I would like a detailed investigation into the role of the oil companies and others in these protests which caused so much inconvenience and hardship to my constituents.

I am concerned about the shortcomings in emergency planning. Throughout the UK, we have emergency planning teams that look at all sorts of potential incidents. This one was overlooked. I would like the Government to

look at the oil warehousing regulations which mean that supermarkets keep a small stock of supplies while oil refineries must keep over 60 days' supply.

Finally, I hope that the House will uphold the principle that bully-boy tactics employed by any group against society as a whole—however noble they feel their cause to be—are unacceptable.

6.20 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): The Government and Labour Members still have not learned, have they? They still have not listened to what is going on out there. We have heard today about thugs, bully boys and blockades. We have heard about conspiracy theories, and hon. Members have been critical of the RHA and the NFU for not pulling together. There cannot be much of a conspiracy if everyone was doing their own thing.

The fact is that those protesting in my constituency were hard-pressed owner-drivers, farmers and rural people. It was a spontaneous and popular uprising against the highest fuel prices in Europe.

The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster), criticised the Minister for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Oldham, West and Royton (Mr. Meacher), for not appearing on television. Of course, the right hon. Gentleman did not appear on television. I regard him as an honest and decent Minister. He is too honest for his own good, as he found out on Sunday when he admitted that the Government might bring back the escalator. We saw Ministers getting their orders to go on television and tell whopping big untruths about thuggery, intimidation, violence and the imminent collapse of the health service. There was a whole pile of spin and propaganda. Despite the fact that I think that the right hon. Gentleman has policies that are totally wrong, I know that he is too decent to do that dirty, grubby work for the Government.

We heard today about climate change which, of course, is happening. However, it is not being caused solely and uniquely by Britain. The burden of solving the problem should not fall only on United Kingdom businesses. China, India, the United States—these huge consumers of fossil fuels are putting infinitely more pollution into the atmosphere than Britain and should play their part. Why have the Government decided—and boasted after the Kyoto summit—that Britain would take a heavier share of the burden than anyone else?

Oil prices have risen in the last few months and are now up to approximately $35 a barrel. However, oil is the same price throughout the world. The French are paying the same price for crude oil as we are in Britain, yet their fuel is taxed at least 15p a litre lower than ours. The Germans pay the same price for crude oil and their fuel is taxed at least 20p lower than ours. That is why our people protested and why small business men, farmers and lorry drivers protested against a situation that the Government created.

Although I am happy to defend the Minister for the Environment on many occasions, I cannot defend one aspect of his speech today. He was very careful to pick a finely defined time limit, saying that, in the last 18 months, crude oil prices had risen and therefore that the oil price has had a disproportionate effect, rather than the Government's taxation policies. However, the Government boast that they reinvented history from May 1997 and that a new world order began when they came in. The Government have been in power now for three years and it is perfectly legitimate to compare the price of fuel in May 1997 with the price now. In May 1997, the average price was £2.68 per gallon. In September of this year, the average was £3.91 and there are some parts of the country where the price is more than £4 per gallon.

Since May 1997, it is not the price increase in crude oil that has resulted in us having the highest fuel costs in Europe; it is the extra taxes imposed unfairly by the Government on our motorists and businesses because they want to bring in extra revenue.

We have heard stories today about intimidation and, no doubt, there was some. I deplore it, as everyone does. But it was nothing like on the scale of the gross exaggeration that we are hearing from Labour Members and the Government. If there had been intimidation, the British police service would moved immediately to stop it.

Mrs. Lawrence: Does the right hon. Gentleman describe as intimidation the names of tanker drivers who wanted to carry out deliveries being given to protesters, who did not threaten the drivers on the line but their families in their homes?

Mr. Maclean: If people were threatening families and individuals in their homes, of course that is intimidation and there would have been some disgraceful examples, which we all deplore. However, the Government are trying to pretend that that was on a massive scale and that everyone was doing it. That is not the case at all, as the police said.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) complained about the cosy, relaxed atmosphere on the picket line and at protests, with police and protesters having amenable relations. That, of course, was because there was very little violence and intimidation. The police made it clear that if any single driver wanted through, they would move heaven and earth to make sure that that vehicle got through. That is their job.

As the police pointed out after the Prime Minster appeared on television on that Tuesday night—like a startled rabbit caught in the car headlights—to say that the police would get things through, if owner-drivers were asked by protesters not to go through and decided voluntarily not to do so, there was nothing the police could or should do. Any single driver who wanted to get his vehicle through was allowed to do so.

To begin with, some people did pull vehicles across the road. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston was careful in his language and said that, at a certain time on the night of 7 September, there was a blockade. How long did it last? When the police asked those involved to move their vehicles to the side, did that not happen almost instantly? When the police said to protesters that they could not stop vehicles and must stand at the side of the road, did they not, on nearly every single occasion, obey that? Of course they did. The Government cannot pretend that an unrepresentative bunch of people blocked the roads and that people who wanted through were stopped, as that is not the case.

Mr. Bercow: Are not the conspiracy theories which we are now hearing a pitiful example of buck-passing by

[Mr. Bercow]

Labour Members who, for 41 months, have voted for policies that made their local industries less competitive and undermined the living standards of their constituents? Is not it right and proper that they should pay the price on polling day?

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those were exactly the words that I intended to use when I came to that portion of my speech.

The Government must realise that when our hauliers, farmers and rural businesses are faced with the highest fuel duty and the highest vehicle excise duties in Europe, as their businesses go bankrupt and people are laid off, of course they will wish to protest about it. They are desperate to save their businesses. The Government have got to accept that that is the case. They must stop their propaganda exercise of looking for conspiracies and trying to colour the picture.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maclean: No, I apologise to the hon. Lady, but I must conclude.

The Government are trying to blacken the names of those who are protesting in case there is another dispute. If we are looking for conspiracy theories, we should go back to what happened last week, when the BBC suddenly came up with a programme out of thin air, putting on the airwaves a "Today" programme about the terrible intimidation that had apparently taken place a few weeks before. That intimidation was not reported to the police at the time—indeed, it was denied. When the BBC was asked whether it was put up to it by the Government, a spokesman would not comment.

Mr. Paterson: Millbank tower.

Mr. Maclean: Well, we have got our answer there. How convenient that, on the morning that the BBC decided that there was an apparent intimidation problem that they had not been able to find before, despite efforts to do so with millions of cameras around the country. The BBC was desperate to find examples of intimidation that could show on television à la miners' strike. It could not find those examples but, two weeks later, unsubstantiated reports appeared. On the day that the fuel task force met, the Home Secretary was able to talk about threats and intimidation, a few hours after the "Today" programme introduced the issue.

Yes, there was a conspiracy, which relates to Millbank and Downing street. We saw that as Minister after Minister was put up to a propaganda exercise, as well as the disaster of the Secretary of State for Health giving an outrageous line on television, which was later denied by the health authorities. The Government have a chance to listen to the protesters who are deeply worried about their situation. Having been given that chance, the Government should listen and cut duty to the rate that existed at the last Budget. The windfall that they have suddenly got from rising oil prices is the people's money, and they should return it to them.

6.32 pm

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): I realise that time is short and that I must keep my comments to a mere two or three minutes.

This is a serious and important debate. I am disappointed that more Members have not been able to speak and, indeed, that there are few of us in the Chamber. For a variety of reasons, the cost of fuel has caused deep anger and frustration, especially in rural areas. I speak for my constituents in Shrewsbury and Atcham in a very rural part of Shropshire, and I have a long history of supporting rural car users and road hauliers in their bid to reduce the price of fuel.

I would like to put on record the fact that I have had several meetings in London and Shrewsbury with Ministers and road hauliers. I presented a petition to Parliament on this very subject in March 1999 and even went on the national BBC programme "Panorama" to call for Government action.

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Marsden: No, I am sorry; I have one minute left.

I have been criticised by the left of my party, the right of the Conservative party and even the Road Haulage Association, so I feel that I am starting to get something right. The problem is complex and difficult and, as many hon. Members have said, revolves around many factors. There are no easy solutions: we do not need quick-fix Tory tax gimmicks, but well thought out policies.

I shall put the matter in context. My postbag contains far more post from my rural area about health, education and wider transport issues than about the specifics of fuel tax which nevertheless are important. The effects of the tax on rural areas have been underestimated, although in 1997 the Institute for Fiscal Studies reported that poor and rural areas bear a disproportionate effect of the high cost of fuel.

I should like to pay tribute to Shropshire's public services for what they did in those seven days in September to bring fuel into the county. I played a small part on the Wednesday evening, when the leader of Shropshire county council told me that not one litre of fuel could get through, and that that was starting to jeopardise essential services, such as day care, home help and the fire service. The Royal Shrewsbury hospital had to cancel operations, schools were closed and there were even food shortages. It was a desperate time.

Some small rural road hauliers have genuinely suffered. I accept what my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) said about overcapacity, but I should like to mention Jim and Tina Jordan, whom I have known for several years. In October 1997, fuel cost them about 28 per cent. of their haulage business's annual turnover of £400,000, but that proportion is now about 40 per cent. Before Opposition Members get too excited, the year before we were elected, the Jordans spent 31 per cent. of their turnover on fuel. Initially, therefore, the Labour Government helped to bring down that cost.

I am calling for urgent action from the Government. We have 19 days to go and I fear that the protesters will be back. We need a far more genuine and sympathetic understanding of the annoyance and anger in rural areas and must pressurise oil companies to reduce profits and

educate the public to use cars less. We need international action to pressurise OPEC and the EU. We need targeted help now for rural groups, including small road hauliers, essential car users and low-income groups. We also need a new ministry of rural development to start to co-ordinate rural policy better.

In summary, I urge the Government to act in the pre-Budget report and urge the protesters not to return. Above all, we do not need Tory tax gimmicks, but real action to help my constituents in the countryside.

6.36 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Listening to the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden), I wonder why he voted for the increases in fuel duty.

We heard two contrasting speeches at the opening of this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) delivered an incisive, analytical speech with flair and imagination, in complete contrast to the ducking and weaving of the Minister for the Environment, who has not bothered to turn up for the winding-up speeches. I am not surprised at that—in fact, I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman is still a Minister after his speech, which left Government policy on the fuel duty escalator in complete tatters.

At the weekend, the right hon. Gentleman made a gaffe in a television studio, when he said that the escalator might be brought back. The Treasury was put on the back foot, and *The Independent* reported:

> No plan to use the fuel escalator, insists Brown . . . The Chancellor said he had no plans to bring back the fuel duty escalator under which the cost of petrol automatically rose.

The same day, *The Guardian* said:

> Meacher is rebuked for floating fuel tax escalator . . . Government spokesmen said ministers had no intention of bringing back the escalator.

In a big article, *The Daily Telegraph* said:

> Brown on defensive over fuel escalator . . . The Chancellor's intervention followed an unguarded remark from Michael Meacher, the environment minister, who suggested that the escalator could be brought back if world oil prices dipped suddenly.

Could the policy be clearer after that statement from the Treasury?

Under pressure from my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells, the Minister for the Environment talked about the escalator and said that the Government would look at the matter on a case-by-case basis. What does that mean and what is the policy now? How much does the price of fuel have to fall before the Minister will consider the matter on a case-by-case basis? Will the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who is replying to the debate and has the benefit of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury sitting beside him, provide clarity on the policy? What is the Government's policy on the escalator?

For millions of people the length and breadth of this country, the car is a necessity, not a luxury. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) said, that message is hopelessly lost on the Government, who continue to attack the car and its use at every opportunity. Just nine months after the election, the then Minister of Transport, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang), was asked "Are you prepared to tax us, to persuade us, force us even to get out of our cars?". He replied, "Yes, indeed." He was as good as his word.

The facts are inescapable. In May 1997, the average cost of unleaded petrol was 59p a litre; today it is about 80p. The amount of tax on a litre of such petrol was 46p in 1997. Today it is 61p—an increase of 34 per cent.—yet the Chancellor consistently blames the high price of oil. He is obviously not aware that Britain has almost the cheapest pre-tax petrol in the European Union, behind Germany. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) noted in his excellent speech, adding on tax causes Britain to leap to the top of the price league, with petrol that is 23 per cent. more expensive than the EU average.

The reason is straightforward. In the Government's first 21 months in power, they held three Budgets and increased petrol by at least 6 per cent. above inflation each time—that is three annual increases in less than two years. In the 1999 Budget, the Chancellor increased diesel duty by 12 per cent., with a devastating effect on hauliers and farmers.

The net upshot is that, under Labour, people are paying about £7 a week more for their petrol, at a time when the old-age pension has gone up by just over £5 a week. There is the rub: this Government are different from Labour Governments of old. Under Denis Healey, Labour was honest—he said that he would tax the rich until the pips squeaked. Six weeks ago, the pips squeaked all right, except that it was not the rich complaining but ordinary people—hard-working families, and struggling pensioners trying to live on the extra 75p a week. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said, the families hit hardest are those on the lowest incomes. The rich can afford £350 a year, but people on low incomes in the Labour party's heartlands are the ones who are feeling it most.

Mr. Bennett *rose—*

Mr. Ottaway: I will not give way; I do not have the time.

As we look back on the 20th century, we see that the motor car has been the most liberating influence of our time. As my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) said, it has freed millions to lead their lives as they choose. That freedom is now under attack. The cost of motoring is overtaking the costs of housing and food as the single most expensive item of expenditure in the household budget.

However, the Government's unflinching hostility to the motorist was best illustrated when the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry told the "Today" programme on 11 September:

> What people need to answer is if they want to see a cut in fuel duty, 2p off a litre is £1 billion of public spending. Where are those cuts going to occur?

That was a plain and straightforward statement by a senior member of the Government. It was straight intimidation of the British public.

The Secretary of State was saying that cuts in fuel tax mean cuts in spending. He got his cue from the Prime Minister, who earlier had said:

> Cutting fuel duty by 2p would cost almost £1 billion . . . but you don't hear them talking about putting up signs outside hospitals saying the numbers of doctors and nurses will have to be cut because the Government doesn't have enough money.

[Mr. Ottaway]

What both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry were saying was that cuts in fuel duty as a result of continued protest would lead to cuts in public expenditure. Labour Back Benchers quoted that statement like parrots, and according to them schools and hospitals were all under threat—what absolute bunk.

It has been authoritatively reported that, with tax revenues overshooting and Departments underspending, the public sector financial surplus will be huge. Ernst and Young estimates it at £16 billion this year, £10 billion more than the Treasury expected. I see a smile on the face of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

The windfall from the rising price of crude oil will be substantial. The House of Commons Library has been advised by the Inland Revenue that a 30 per cent. increase in the world oil price to $29 a barrel would raise North sea revenues by around £1.7 billion in a full year—a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham.

The oil price today is at well over $31 a barrel, and the Treasury has the extra bonus—

Mr. Bennett: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Surely it is the custom of the House that an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman gives way at least once during a wind-up speech.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Whether or not people responding from the Dispatch Box give way is entirely a matter for them.

Mr. Ottaway: Let us therefore have no more rubbish from the Government about their being unable to afford to make a cut in fuel duty because public expenditure will have to be cut as a result.

The Government's handling of the fuel crisis was lamentable. They were taken by surprise. As my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield said in his excellent speech, the Government were out of touch. They were not listening to our road hauliers and farmers, whose livelihoods were being destroyed, nor to hard-pressed businesses and families hit by Labour stealth taxes. The Government did not listen to the nurse going to her night duty, to the mother picking up her children from school, or to the pensioner nipping down to the shops. For all those people, the car is a part of their lives.

The Government did not listen to a nation that said, "Enough is enough." During the crisis, it took them four days to find out what was going on. The pumps in Sedgefield were closed. My mother-in-law was seen walking down London's Cromwell road with an empty fuel can, but it was not until the luvvies of Islington could not get to the delicatessen to buy their sun-dried tomatoes that the Government knew that they had a crisis on their hands.

Asked why he thought there was widespread discontent, the Prime Minister said, "Well, I hear the occasional story of that." He should get out more. He said, "Leave it to me. In 24 hours, everything will be back to normal." However, the next day things were even worse.

The Prime Minister was busy saying, "Crisis, what crisis?" I will tell the House what sort of crisis it was: it was a crisis of judgment, management and, above all, trust. If the public cannot trust the Government, they will quickly replace them with a party that they can trust. How can people trust the Labour party when the Deputy Prime Minister behaves as he does? The *Daily Mail* last Friday carried a story headlined, "Prescott's public transport strategy: He takes the train, his luggage goes by Jaguar". When his spokesman was asked about that, he said that the Deputy Prime Minister liked to travel by public transport.

The Conservative party has long argued for lower taxes in general, and for lower taxes on petrol and diesel in particular. We support the Confederation of British Industry's call for a cut in fuel tax. If we were in government now, we would not be cutting fuel duty—we would not need to, as we would never have got into this position in the first place.

The Conservative party has consistently believed that fuel taxes should be lower, and we have voted against the increases in fuel duty. Between now and the next election, the Chancellor has the opportunity to reduce taxes. If he can, he should; if he will not, we will.

6.47 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): It is worth reminding the Opposition of a few basic facts. The previous Conservative Government introduced the fuel duty escalator in 1993 at 3 per cent. but raised it to 5 per cent. in the same year. Figures published with their last Budget showed that the escalator would carry on.

Our much-thumbed copy of the Conservatives' campaign guide for the 1997 election stated:

> Fuel duty has been progressively increased since the November 1993 Budget to help fulfil our commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to 1990 levels—

not a matter that we have heard much about from them this afternoon. The document went on to talk about that being in line with the previous Conservative Government's strategy of

> annual increases averaging at least 5 per cent.

That is the basis on which they hoped to be elected. If we had carried on with the previous Government's fuel escalator, taxes on fuel would be higher than they are now. However, we abolished the fuel duty escalator, and we have reduced the rates of vehicle excise duty for 4 million motorists.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) said that the Conservative party argues for lower taxes. That may be true, but it does not deliver them when in government. The previous Conservative Government solemnly pledged that there would be no tax increases, but then they introduced 22 Tory tax rises—the largest number ever. That is the record of the Conservative party, and people have not forgotten it.

However, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), the shadow Chancellor, yesterday told a House of Lords Select Committee that he would scrap the independence of the Bank of England in setting interest rates if he thought that it was being incompetent. Frankly, when one compares what happened when the shadow Chancellor was Chief Secretary to the Treasury with the record over the past three and a half years of the Monetary Policy Committee that this Government established, there is little doubt about whose judgment

most people would trust. How can anybody now have any confidence of stability in interest rate arrangements under a Conservative Government? Even now, they have not learned the lessons of boom and bust. They would simply repeat the same mistakes all over again.

We have had to make some tough choices over the past three and a half years. Those tough choices have delivered unprecedented economic stability, benefiting all parts of the United Kingdom. We have put public finances back on track. We have converted a £27 billion deficit at the time of the election into a £16 billion debt repayment last year.

The results are clear: last week's unemployment figures were down to levels that we have not seen since the 1970s. By reducing debt and cutting unemployment, we can allocate money that under the Conservatives would have gone to debt charges and unemployment benefits to better public services instead—schools, hospitals, transport. That has happened not despite the decisions that we have made on taxation but because of them. That means no irresponsible lurches on tax policy and no reckless moves to jeopardise this vital new stability in the economy, which is so important for the future of all of us.

We entirely understand the concern over high fuel prices which has been expressed in recent weeks. We are listening to road hauliers, petroleum retailers, motoring organisations and members of the public. I particularly take the points made about those in rural areas. We have been listening carefully to them.

Let us look at the record on the haulage industry, to which a number of hon. Members have rightly drawn attention, including the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). Let us see how the haulage sector fared under the previous Government. Let us compare the most recent year—1999–2000—with 1992-93, when the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea, became Chief Secretary to the Treasury. In that year, bankruptcies in road transport ran at nearly twice the current level. Company liquidations were more than twice the current level. The figures were more than last year's level in every year while the right hon. Gentleman was at the Treasury. That was the price that the road transport industry paid for Tory boom and bust—twice the pain of today. Of course, it was not only the haulage industry that suffered but the entire economy. No, there will be no going back to Tory boom and bust.

The Lex Transfleet report on the Freight 2000 survey shows that haulage firms, on the whole, in the United Kingdom are planning expansion in the coming 12 months. The report concludes:

this illustrates some optimism in the industry.

As hon. Members on both sides of the House have pointed out, some parts of the haulage industry have serious problems, and I will come back to them shortly. However, the last thing that hauliers need is a return to the Tory instability of the past.

As well as their success in managing the economy, the Government have also been right to use the tax system for environmental objectives, in the way described by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment at the start of the debate. We have provided duty cuts for cleaner fuels and lower vehicle excise duty for cleaner cars. We have successfully used fuel duty incentives to improve local air quality, through duty differentials for ultra-low sulphur diesel and the new one for ultra-low sulphur petrol which has taken effect this month.

To answer the point made by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), we have a low rate of duty for road fuel gases. This morning I met promoters of bio-diesel. We are interested in fuel cells and other developments as well.

The overall increases in fuel duties in recent years have played an important role too. They have given clear incentives to design more fuel-efficient vehicles, limit unnecessary journeys and consider alternatives to the car. Those have played a significant part in putting us on track to meet our Kyoto commitments. Real-terms increases in fuel duties between 1996 and 1999 will produce savings of between 1 and 2.5 million tonnes of carbon a year by 2010. That is a substantial contribution to achieving our climate change objectives, and a contribution that I believe all Members will welcome.

Fuel prices have risen since the Budget, as they have in the rest of the world in response to the actions of OPEC and to demand and supply in the global oil markets. The right response is to address the source of the increase, which is OPEC. That is why the Government have been taking international action to help persuade OPEC to increase the supply of oil and to take steps to bring down its price. We look forward to an enhanced dialogue between oil producers and consumers at the international energy forum next month in Riyadh. We welcome OPEC's recent production increases, and we want it to deliver existing commitments to increase output again and to take additional measures if prices remain unsustainably high.

Rural communities are typically more dependent on the car, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) said. That is one of the reasons we have reduced VED on small cars. For many people, a car is a necessity, but even in rural areas many people are without a car. There can be acute travel problems for those in rural areas seeking work, young people, elderly people and those with a disability if they do not have access to a car. That is why we are so committed to supporting public transport in rural areas. That is why the 10-year investment programme in transport is so important in both rural and urban areas.

Let me say a little more about haulage. We are committed to a strong and successful road haulage industry. We have been listening carefully to hauliers and other businesses over recent weeks to ensure that we understand fully the pressures that they face. I have taken part in a number of those discussions, and three things are very clear. First, the way in which fuel prices affect haulage firms varies according to their circumstances. Some firms can pass on higher costs but others simply cannot. Secondly, the competitive pressures affecting the industry depend only in part on the level of fuel prices. There is some evidence of overcapacity in parts of the industry, as my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) pointed out. However, there is also a shortage of trained drivers, the industry's most valuable asset.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): My hon. Friend's comments tend to back up what was said at the

[Shona McIsaac]

30 discussions I have had with haulage firms in my constituency. If he wants to know the views of the many haulage firms in Cleethorpes, I will send him the results of the survey. It mentions overcapacity, lack of drivers and competitive pressures in addition to fuel costs.

Mr. Timms: I would be delighted to see that survey, and I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she has done on that issue.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire) *rose—*

Mr. Maclean *rose—*

Mr. Timms: I will not give way again. The hon. Member for Croydon, South did not give way.

All those issues have been raised with us in the road haulage forum that we established more than a year ago and of which I am a member. We meet regularly with representatives of the Freight Transport Association, the Road Haulage Association, the Transport and General Workers Union and others in the industry. The forum has proved very constructive in helping shape our approach to the haulage industry.

We have, for example, reduced vehicle excise duty on lorries facing the most intense international competition. We reduced the industry's vehicle excise duty bill by £45 million in the previous Budget. That is why the Freight Transport Association maintained at the time of the Budget that

for transport this has been a positive Budget—the morale in the industry is a whole lot better off.

It is worth recalling that *The Daily Telegraph* called the Budget

the most motorist-friendly in 8 years.

The Automobile Association said:

this is the first time drivers can take some heart from a Budget in over seven years.

We are committed to securing a strong and successful United Kingdom haulage industry. The kind of direct action that we saw in September, however, is not the way to influence the Government. I was grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) for his account of what happened in his constituency. Nobody in the House should wish the Government to take decisions in response to such action.

At the beginning of the debate, the House will have been dismayed by the refusal of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells to condemn intimidation—as all of us certainly should do. The Government will make their decision in Budgets, not in response to blockades. The key priorities for hard-working families, for hauliers and for businesses throughout the country are to lock in the new stability, which provides a platform for building a more prosperous Britain and has already achieved the lowest levels of unemployment for a generation, and to take steps to address the environmental challenges that we all face. The Government are delivering on those priorities; they will be at the heart of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's pre-Budget report when he delivers it to the House in two weeks' time.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 144, Noes 378.

Division No. 311] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Rickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel

Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda

Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Mike Hall.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 322, Noes 159.

Division No. 312] **[7.15 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berningham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie

Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond

Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House applauds the tough, long-term economic decisions taken by the Government to create a platform of stability on which to invest in education, health, transport and law and order, building a Britain where there is opportunity and security for all; recognises the difficulty that has been caused to some sectors of the economy due to the rapid increase in world oil prices over the past 18 months; welcomes the Government's determination to set its economic and fiscal policy within the context of the normal budget and democratic processes; deplores the previous Government's record of boom and bust and under-investment in the nation's vital public services; notes that the proportion of the cost of petrol accounted for by VAT and duty is lower than when this Government took office in May 1997; welcomes the Government's environmental record which has seen Britain lead the world in the fight against global warming; and welcomes the Government's 10-year plan to modernise the nation's transport system, cut congestion, deliver real choice and see a 42 per cent. real term's increase in spending.

Teachers (Supply and Recruitment)

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): We now come to the next Opposition debate, and I inform the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.27 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I beg to move,

That this House views with concern the growing crisis of teacher supply and recruitment which is affecting the quality of education in the country's schools; notes that there has been a net outflow of teachers from the profession since 1997; deplores the Government's complacency and failure to deal with the underlying problems leading to the decline of the teaching profession; recognises that, unless action is taken, education standards will fall in the future; and calls on the Government to set the schools free, give heads the power to exercise discipline policy in their schools, rid teachers of the excessive bureaucratic burdens they face and let teachers teach.

I am sad that, despite all the warnings that the Government have been given over the past two years of the growing crisis in teacher supply and recruitment, today we face a worsening problem and a Government unable to recognise the damage that their policies are doing to the quality of education for children in our schools.

We should be absolutely clear. This is not just a debate about teachers; it is about children and the standard of education that they receive. That standard is falling and will continue to fall. *[Interruption.]* shows just how out of touch Ministers are with what is happening in our schools that they choose to laugh. However, the standard of education will continue to fall as long as the Government do nothing to improve recruitment and to stem the tide of teachers leaving our schools as a direct result of Government policy.

Conservative Members cannot debate this subject without first putting on record our recognition of the hard work and commitment of hundreds of thousands of teachers in our schools and our gratitude to those who carry on despite the burden of bureaucracy and in the face of Government interference. It is the children who matter, but their education is suffering. It suffers when there are not enough teachers in schools; it suffers when there are not enough specialist teachers; it suffers if schools have to rely on a constant supply of temporary supply teachers; it suffers when teachers are stressed out and have their non-contact time removed and have to work increasing hours to carry out their own teaching requirements and to cover for vacancies.

There is already evidence of the impact on standards. Professor Howson of Oxford Brookes university—when commenting a month or two ago on this year's key stage 2 maths results in London, in which a third of inner-London boroughs made little or no gains at all—said that

the results might be an indication that teacher shortages in the capital were having an impact.

Teacher shortages are severe. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps, instead of debating with the Liberal Democrats which party Professor Howson is a member of—an entirely academic debate between Labour and the Liberal Democrats these days, given their pact—the Secretary of State would have the courtesy to listen to what is being said.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): One of the facts to which the Secretary of State might care to listen and

which my hon. Friend can add to her magazine of ammunition to destroy the Government's credibility, is that, in the district of Harborough, three primary school heads are retiring early this year as a direct consequence of the Government's activities, and it is impossible to find replacements for them.

Mrs. May: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for reminding the House of the reality of the Government's policies, which is that schools are being left without head teachers and children's education will suffer as a result. I have no doubt that the teachers in the schools in my hon. and learned Friend's constituency will work their hardest to ensure that children's education does not suffer, but, as a result of the Government's policies, too many schools find that their heads are leaving and that they cannot recruit replacements, and education and children will suffer.

In a report earlier this year, the London chief education officers group told Ministers that it was concerned that there was a potential crisis in the staffing in schools in London. Croydon was recruiting in Australia; Tower Hamlets reported a desperate situation in primary schools and was thinking of recruiting in New Zealand; Merton reported that the situation was worse than ever; Kensington and Chelsea spoke of pockets of despair in some primary schools, not related to the standards of the schools; and Southwark was concerned about the quality of applicants.

It is little wonder that the situation is so bad. The Government have failed to meet their target for recruitment into initial teacher training in each of the past three years. During the past three years, there has been a net outflow of teachers from the profession. Applications for maths and science postgraduate certificate of education courses, with the Government's golden hellos, have slumped below the levels that prompted the launch of the initiative in the first place. Last year, the intake for maths trainee teachers was less than half the required number, and for technology teachers it was two-thirds down on the target. Late last year, the Government even slashed the recruitment targets for technology teachers by a third and they still failed to meet the target.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): Will the hon. Lady therefore explain how come last year recruitment to initial teacher training for maths teachers rose for the first time since 1994 and for science teachers for the first time since 1996?

Mrs. May: The hon. Lady can quote what figures she likes, but the reality is that the Government are missing their targets. It is simple. There are not enough maths or technology teachers, and the Government are failing to address that particular problem.

To meet the targets for teacher training of graduates in modern languages and maths, about 40 per cent. of all graduates in those subjects would need to go into teaching every year. The number of teachers this year is 2,000 below the required number and during the past year there has been an increase in the gap between the supply of and demand for teachers, and that is on top of estimated vacancies of 17,000. House of Commons figures show that, if nothing changes in the teaching profession up to the year 2004, the overall gap between the number of teachers available and the number of teachers required could grow to 31,000. In other words, on that basis, in five years time, we would be 31,000 teachers short.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The hon. Lady has done a good job of setting out the problem, but can she explain what she proposes to do about it? Surely she does not propose that simply the election of another Conservative Government will make a difference. Does not the solution have something to do with alternative salaries for some of these well-qualified graduates?

Mrs. May: I can well imagine the Liberal Democrats embarrassment when they hear the reality of the Government's policy being set out as clearly as it is today, but if the hon. Gentleman will have some patience, I shall come to his point. In the meantime, if he wants an instant answer, I suggest that he reads the motion.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): My hon. Friend is in danger of being unfair in simply criticising the Labour Government. We in Dorset have a Liberal Democrat-controlled county council running the education authority, which is failing time and again. When we have good Conservative policies getting the money down to the schools, we shall cut out those Liberal Democrats who are stopping teachers from being employed.

Mrs. May: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding us of the iniquities of Liberal Democrat-controlled councils, from which my constituents suffered until May this year when, I am pleased to say, the royal borough of Maidenhead and Windsor returned to Conservative control.

The time bomb that is ticking away under our schools may be even more explosive than the figures that I have given suggest. More than 50 per cent. of the teacher work force is now over the age of 45, and how many of them, faced with the increasing pressures of life under the Government, will soon be looking for early retirement? We already have schools on a four-day working week—Beechwood school in Slough and Corby community college. As was clear when I spoke to the head teacher of Corby community college, that was done reluctantly, but it has happened. It is interesting that Corby community college has gone on to a four-day week, but the Labour-controlled local education authority could afford to send someone to stand around outside the school while I was meeting the head. That person was not doing anything, just standing around. That is how Labour spends money that should be going into our schools.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Would the hon. Lady care to take this opportunity to apologise to the House and the people of Corby for riding her Tory bandwagon into Corby, kicking Corby kids and making a political football out of Corby community college, something that has brought the Conservative party and the hon. Lady's reputation into severe disrepute?

Mrs. May: I make no apology for visiting schools in Britain. I make no apology for visiting schools such as Brooke Weston technology college outside Corby, which I was due to visit on the same day that I went to Corby community college, as the hon. Gentleman well knows.

[Mrs. May]

I make no apology for visiting Corby community college and hearing what is happening in schools. The problem today is that it is those on the Government Front Bench who fail to understand what is happening in our schools. It is to those on his Front Bench that the hon. Gentleman should direct his attack, not to those on the Opposition Front Bench.

We also know that more schools are likely to go to a four-day week. A school in Medway will be going on to a four-day week within a few days, and more are thinking of following suit. Whatever the statistics showing the size of the problem, they do not show the real impact on children and teachers. The head of a Roman Catholic school in St. Helen's described recruiting as

trying to empty Lake Michigan with a dinner fork.

The deputy head of East Sussex community college said:

Trying to appoint a maths teacher . . . became the dance of the demons with schools phoning each other in desperation.

In their recent report "Coping with Teacher Shortages", Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson reported one head describing how, on hearing that a candidate had not been appointed in a neighbouring school, he immediately rang the head of that school and asked that she be bundled into a taxi so that she could be interviewed and recruited straight away.

The quality of candidates is falling, as reported last month by the head teacher of Chaucer school in the Secretary of State's constituency, which has lost a quarter of its staff in the past year. The lack of applicants for posts means that standards of appointments sometimes fall, as has been reported in the survey conducted recently by the National Union of Teachers. One head said:

I was in great danger of losing the teachers of the other two classes due to stress and violence, so we took this lady on after a 20 minute interview on the phone to Australia. It was an act of faith.

Another said:

I had doubts about the references and offered it to her on a one year contract which she accepted. As the year wore on, I became more and more grateful that I'd listened to that small voice. People who are not up to scratch are gaining employment when they wouldn't if there were a reasonable choice.

Sadly, another head said:

When push comes to shove you've got to put a body in front of the class. So long as you know they are not going to kill a child or maim them—what choice do we have.

That is the situation to which the Government have reduced our schools.

Sometimes the situation seems close to farce. Another head reports:

We have got technologists who teach art. The PE staff teach a bit of maths, a bit of geography. The maths teachers, when we appointed the three, we had to say "You'll be teaching a bit of science, is that all right?" just hoping that they did not say "On your bike".

Faced with an increasingly desperate situation, what attitude do the Government take? Last week, in another place, the Minister was asked about the crisis. What response did the noble Baroness Blackstone give? She said:

My Lords, I think it is a little exaggerated to describe the overall national picture as a "crisis".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 October 2000; Vol. 617, c. 881.]

"Crisis? What crisis?" seems to be the leitmotif of Labour Governments, and that complacency is all too clear to the schools.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Perhaps the Minister in the other place was referring to the private sector. Is my hon. Friend aware that Lichfield cathedral school tells me that preparatory schools in the private sector have no problem in recruiting, because there is now a drift away from the state sector? Teachers do not want to work in the state sector any more, because of the burden of forms and red tape imposed by the Government and the sheer lack of resources in the state sector.

Mrs. May: My hon. Friend is right. Sadly, teachers are leaving the state sector and going into the private sector precisely because of the problems created by the Government. The private sector has the freedom to deliver the packages for those teachers, and offers the freedom in the classroom that the teachers want.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) *rose—*

Mrs. May: I will take one more intervention, then I must make progress.

Fiona Mactaggart: The hon. Lady referred to a school in my constituency that has gone on to short-time teaching. It is a secondary modern school, and one of the reasons for its difficulty in recruiting—not the only one—is the fact that it is a secondary modern school. She said that the same might be about to happen in Medway. Am I right in thinking that the school to which she referred is also a secondary modern school?

Mrs. May: I suggest that the hon. Lady look closely at what is happening in our teaching profession. It is not a question of whether a school is a secondary modern, or the type of school. The problem is caused by a leeching from the teaching profession because of her Government's policies. If she wants teachers to come into the profession, and if she wants to retain teachers in the profession, she should be talking to those on her Front Bench. She should remind them of the problems that they are causing in schools across the country, including in her own constituency.

Ministers have not listened to the problems that have been raised. One head teacher reported to the National Union of Teachers:

There must be four or five schools in this authority with serious vacancies for teachers but we got a written reply from a minister saying there is not a recruitment problem.

If there is not a recruitment problem, why have the Government made teaching in London a shortage occupation for immigration purposes? The statistics and the quotes show the same story all around—a story that the Government have refused to accept or understand.

On the one hand, Ministers say that there is no problem; on the other, they claim that they are solving it by throwing money at it. Ministers are fond of telling us how successful have been their incentive schemes—golden hellos, money for trainee teachers—and we even had the spectacle at the Labour party conference of the Prime Minister claiming that the new bursaries for student teachers had led to a 50 per cent. rise in graduate applications.

That is typical of the Government. They think that, if they spin a story long enough, it will become fact. The reality of graduate applications was set out in an answer to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) from the Minister for School Standards, in which she showed that postgraduate applications have fallen since 1997.

There has been a small increase of 388 applications over the past year, according to the graduate teacher training registry. The Prime Minister said that applications were up by 50 per cent. Perhaps the Secretary of State could tell us under what part of the numeracy strategy 388 becomes 50 per cent. of 30,000. I should be happy to take a response from the Secretary of State, but it seems that none is forthcoming. In any case, the reports from universities, colleges and schools show that the Government are well missing their target, and that is even ignoring the 7 per cent. fall in undergraduate applications.

One of the factors with which the Government have never got to grips is that expressions of interest, or even applications, do not always turn into enrolment on courses. The advertisement about what makes a good teacher was supposed to lead to an increase in interest. Where did it end? The Government missed their targets for recruitment. In the case of the golden hellos, the target was also missed. Similarly, in the case of trainee salaries, "Teacher training misses its target" yet again, according to a headline in *The Times Educational Supplement*.

I received a letter earlier today from the Secretary of State about the debate this evening. He referred to my

new-found concern for teacher recruitment—

[HON. MEMBERS: "What a cheek!"] Yes, it was quite cheeky. I suggest that the Secretary of State look back, if not to my first year in the House, when I raised the issue as a member of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, then to 1998, when I joined the Front-Bench team and first started speaking about the problems that the Government were creating in teacher recruitment and supply. It is the Secretary of State who has lost credibility by not being interested in the problem, as teachers and governors will tell him.

In his letter, the Secretary of State goes on to refer to

your party's plans for substantial spending cuts in education.

That is yet another example of the Government clutching at straws and plucking figures from thin air, in a desperate attempt to make people forget the large sums of money that the right hon. Gentleman and his local government friends hold back from our schools year after year. We will increase the money received by schools. He might not like it, but we will do it.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. May: No, I shall finish dealing with the letter, if I may.

The Secretary of State claims that the Labour Government's introduction of teacher training salaries has

already prevented the substantial reduction in recruitment to teaching which may be expected with a tight graduate labour market—

just like that! When Ministers have been asked about the reports that they have missed their targets in respect of training salaries, they say that it is too early to tell, so how do they know that the problem of teacher recruitment has been solved? That is yet another complacent statement from the Secretary of State.

The right hon. Gentleman deals in his letter with the expansion of the graduate teacher programme and asks whether I will support that. I believe that we must consider different ways of bringing people into teaching at various stages of their life, but I want to see the whole of teacher training changed, with the emphasis on training in schools and learning the craft of teaching. I want to open up the recruitment market for teachers, getting rid of the rigidities in the system.

That will be a far more significant change of approach than tinkering at the edges, as the Government have done, because of their complacency. They offer a bit here and a bit there, but the problem remains.

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. In the letter, I argued that the problem with her policy was that the Opposition cannot refuse to acknowledge that they will match our spending, and then undertake to spend money on teacher recruitment from the centre. Teacher recruitment funding does not come from delegated budgets to schools. It comes from the £180 million that we have allocated for the teacher recruitment and bursary programme and for the school-based graduate salaries that we introduced. I challenge the hon. Lady to say tonight whether she would match the £180 million by 2002 that we will be spending on that issue.

Mrs. May: I have already responded to the Secretary of State. It is not a question of one programme or another. We must consider the whole issue of teacher training and recruitment—the entire package that teachers are offered. We must ensure that teachers come forward because they want once again to do the job of encouraging children to learn in our schools. Sadly, teachers are turning away from that because of the bureaucracy and red tape coming from the Government.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. May: I shall give way just once more.

Mr. Allan: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. There is an important point for anyone who is at university and considering a career in teaching. If the Conservatives were re-elected to government, would they get rid of the golden hellos, the graduate salaries and so on, keep them or enhance them? We need to know that, and graduates need to know that when planning their careers.

Mrs. May: I make this promise to anyone who is considering teacher training: when they come into teacher training under the next Conservative Government in the near future, they will have a far better time in teaching and be able to exercise their professional judgment in the classroom in a way that they cannot do under the present Government.

That brings me to the overwhelming reasons that teachers give for leaving the profession. They are leaving in droves because of increased work load and stress

[Mrs. May]

through the growing burden of red tape and bureaucracy, and the problem of discipline in schools. The Government are doing nothing about it.

When Teresa Heys, a primary school teacher for more than 20 years, left to become a chauffeur, she said:

> I was faced with masses of paperwork every day, which was very time consuming and not what I became a teacher to do.

She is not alone. A secondary school teacher in Shropshire said:

> I am leaving the profession early in order to move up to the Lake District and escape from ridiculous pressures of the current workload: a move in the interests of my prospects of longevity: the job is definitely detrimental to one's health at the moment.

Mr. Blunkett: Oh dear.

Mrs. May: Yet again, the Secretary of State shows that he does not care about what goes on in our schools and that he is out of touch with the reality of pressures that teachers face. Those pressures are driving them out of the profession. We are considering not only teachers, their longevity and health, but the quality of education for children.

The words of a teacher from a primary school in Yorkshire echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) about Lichfield cathedral school:

> I will be leaving the profession to work in the private sector . . . I feel let down by this Government, whom I believe have done nothing to recognise or encourage experienced classroom teachers like myself.

We could cite story after story, and quote after quote from teacher after teacher, all suffering because of the Government.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Secretary of State felt an ounce of sympathy for head teachers such as Marjorie Evans and the predicament in which she recently found herself, he could have expressed it? He did not do that because he feels no sympathy.

Mr. Blunkett: Because it is a Welsh matter.

Mrs. May: The Secretary of State's response to teachers who are worried about the way in which malicious allegations may be made against them, and who find their names dragged through the press and their careers ruined, is that it is nothing to do with him if it happens in Wales. His attitude is, "It's a Welsh matter, so I wasn't going to say anything."

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The Secretary of State's comment was revealing. Although the incident may have been a Welsh matter, it worries teachers throughout the land. The Secretary of State's complacency shows how out of touch he is.

Mrs. May: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Teachers across the country are worried about malicious allegations, and ministerial complacency is breathtaking. Teachers fear that they will be the subject of a malicious allegation, have their names dragged through the press, and have their careers ruined and lives shattered. More than 80 per cent. of such allegations are false. We are committed to providing teachers with the anonymity that they need until the police press charges. Teachers deserve our support in the face of malicious allegations from pupils. I hope that the Secretary of State will commit the Government to follow our lead and adopt such a policy of teacher anonymity.

Teachers are also worried about discipline. The Government amendment is complacent and claims that they have given head teachers,

> the powers to deal effectively with discipline for the first time.

Teachers throughout the country know how hollow are those words. Until the Government give teachers real power to deal with disruptive pupils and get rid of the fines that are levied on schools that do not reach their targets to reduce exclusions and abolish those targets, teachers will not have the powers that they need to discipline disruptive pupils.

One of the key problems that face teachers is red tape and interference from the Government. Last year, one circular was issued by the Department for Education and Employment for every hour of a teacher's work. That robs teachers of time that should be spent in the classroom or preparing lessons. It saps them of energy and enthusiasm and takes away the ability to inspire children. Education should be about inspiring children. Teachers want to ignite the spark in all children, whatever their abilities, that creates a thirst for knowledge and understanding, and an interest in their subject. Exhausted teachers, desperately covering for vacancies that are not in their departments, barely have time and energy to prepare a lesson, let alone ignite the spark of inspiration.

Our teachers are working desperately hard to maintain standards, but the Labour Government have loaded the dice against them. They impose yet more targets and bureaucracy, they name and shame and they centralise. They sap the teaching profession's morale, which sinks lower and lower. The Government's approach, symbolised by the attitude of Government Front-Bench Members this evening, and their sedentary interventions, shows how out of touch they are and how little they care about what happens in our schools.

Unless the Government act now to cut red tape, and stop centralising and interfering in schools, the move out of teaching will continue. The Government will realise that all their tinkering constituted a mere pebble in the ocean. People who express an interest in applying to be teachers will not apply, those who train will not take up teaching posts and teachers will continue to leave. That is not simply a debating point; it is vital if we are to provide a decent standard of education for the country's children.

As one person who is closely involved said, the system is close to meltdown. I hope that the Secretary of State can turn his mind from dreams of becoming Home Secretary and focus on the problems in his Department. Tonight, if the Secretary of State merely promotes his incentives once more and fails to address the underlying problems, the message that he sends to teachers, parents and governors is that he is not interested in the problems that they face from day to day, and that he has closed his ears to their pleas and set his face against the necessary action to reverse the tide of decline. There is a desperate need to set schools free, give head teachers the power to exercise discipline, rid teachers of the red tape and bureaucracy that bedevils them and let teachers teach. The next Conservative Government will do that.

If the Government continue to centralise, interfere, tell teachers how to teach and increase red tape, they will let down not only teachers but children. Standards of education will fall and people will know where the blame lies: with an arrogant, complacent and out-of-touch Labour Government, and Labour will pay the price.

7.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

welcomes the successful new measures introduced by the Government to support teacher recruitment, including training salaries, incentives for shortage subjects and an expanded graduate teacher programme; welcomes the fact that there has been a significant increase in applications and acceptances for teacher training as a result; further welcomes the support given by the School Teachers Review Body for the Government's plans to better reward good teaching; notes that there are nearly 7,000 more teachers in post now than in 1998; further notes that primary and infant class sizes have fallen after rising annually under the previous administration; recognises that headteachers have got both the resources and the powers to deal effectively with discipline for the first time; and commends the work of the Government in addressing specific recruitment difficulties in London and the positive and pro-active approach of this administration towards recruiting and rewarding teachers more generally.

Can I say how good it was to experience the gems of wisdom that the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) presented, which took us so much further forward in finding solutions to problems? Of course I cannot. The hon. Lady did not come up with a single solution to the problems. She cannot match the spending to which we are committed for the next three years because her leader and shadow Chancellor will not help her to do that. She could not say whether she would retain and spend the £180 million on the recruitment programmes, the graduate teacher salaries, the bursaries, and the incentives in London to ensure that teachers are in the classroom. She could not give us an assurance that she would increase teachers' salaries and match the performance-related promotion because she cannot commit those on her Front Bench to matching our spending.

Tonight the hon. Member for Maidenhead has offered nothing but doom and gloom. I have some advice for her. I advise her not to pretend—to use words such as "crisis" when there is no crisis. There is a problem in specific parts of the country, including London and the south-east. That problem must be addressed. However, there is no universal problem or crisis, and to suggest that there is undermines the commitment of those, including teachers, who want to attract young and old alike back into the classroom. They want to encourage people to come into one of the best professions in the world.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us when a problem becomes a crisis?

Mr. Blunkett: The problem became a crisis when the Conservatives were elected in 1979, and started to cut spending on education and undermine the teaching profession.

It is important that we compare like with like. Our use of statistics must be understandable and deeply honest, and the hon. Member for Maidenhead has not used them in that way. It is also important to compare like with like in terms of the economic and labour market situation with which we are faced. We should reflect on what happened in the late 1980s, before the genuine crisis that was created—

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): What crisis?

Mr. Blunkett: It was a crisis. I think that everyone accepted that Black Wednesday was a crisis. It wasted £15 billion of our national reserves. That is the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question. I consider Black Wednesday to be a crisis.

We are talking this evening of a real challenge to us all to get things right. Let us compare like with like.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I will in a moment.

Let us compare full-time posts, not temporary and supply teacher posts. Let us ensure that when we make a comparison we get it right. Let us consider whether what has already been put in place is making a difference. In other words, have we recognised that there is a problem? Yes, we have. Have we done something about it? Yes, we have. Is it beginning to work? Yes, it is.

The problem should not be addressed only by the Department for Education and Employment and the Teacher Training Agency. They alone should not put measures in place to deal with it. It is one that should be considered across government. Conservative Members never recognised that when they were in government. That is why the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is working with my Department on the start-up programme for attracting and encouraging young people to come to London by providing the scheme that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will be announcing shortly. We want to ensure that teachers can buy or rent a house. That is a significant difficulty in London at present. Indeed, it has been a problem in London over many years.

The hon. Member for Maidenhead, in her litany of local authorities having difficulties, mentioned Tower Hamlets. In 1989, there were 450 permanent vacancies in Tower Hamlets. It is reasonable to use 1989 as a comparison after the 1988 boom. The comparison includes the labour market, the rise in salaries and the competition for good graduates. If we compare 1989 and the present situation, we arrive at a reasonable view of what has been happening.

There were 5,500 vacancies in the teaching profession in 1989, and 3.7 per cent. of those were in London. There are now slightly fewer than 3,000 vacancies throughout the country, and 2.7 per cent. of those are in London. Vacancies throughout the country are slightly less than 1 per cent. That is comparing the figures that were available in 1989 with the figures that are now available.

Let us take the Library figures. They include part-time and supply teachers, which the Department does not include in its figures. The figure of 429,000 which the hon. Member for Maidenhead has put out to the press cannot be compared with the 404,600 which we acknowledge in terms of normal statistical arrangements.

[Mr. Blunkett]

I do not demur from the Library's statistics. Taking the exemplification that they make, I do not say that there would not be the sort of shortfall that the hon. Lady has outlined. I am sorry to disappoint her, but I will not go into statistical doublethink or doubletalk and suggest that the problem would not arise. The problem is that the Library statistics were based on the January count: 10 months ago—not now. At the beginning of the year we recognised that a major problem was afoot. We understood that if we did not take action there would be a genuine crisis. On 30 March—a fact that the hon. Lady seems to have ignored—we announced a package of measures, to which I have referred. The package was expensive, but necessary to ensure that we reversed the decline in teacher recruitment.

The package is working. To suggest otherwise is to undermine the efforts of the Teacher Training Agency and those of local authorities that are trying genuinely to recruit. Above all, it would undermine the efforts of head teachers, whose job it is to fill vacancies. It does not help to try to get smart 10 months later; to undermine the efforts that are being made to recruit; and to play down the measures that have been put in place. A failure to acknowledge that we have put measures in place to recruit and that there are nearly 7,000 extra teachers in the classroom compared with two years ago is similarly unhelpful. The 7,000 have been recruited to reduce class sizes and to relieve the pressure on teachers that the hon. Lady has described.

Yes, there is pressure. There will be pressure. There was pressure when I was a teacher. There needs to be pressure, and also mutual support. It is a difficult job. It will always be a challenging job. I will always be able to read letters from teachers who would prefer to leave the profession and live in the Lake district. There are times when I would like to go to live in the Lake district, and tonight is one of them. However, I shall have recovered by the morning. When I have recovered, I shall continue to take the pressure because it is worth it. Similarly, it is worth being a teacher.

Mrs. May: Given the right hon. Gentleman's comments, is he rejecting the figures that were sent to my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) not 10 months ago—not in March—but one month ago, by the Minister for School Standards, which show clearly that there is still a fall in applications for teacher training this year?

Mr. Blunkett: I am denying none of the statistics in terms of their severity or impact. I am suggesting that the take-up of places from the autumn has risen by 5 per cent. overall. There is still a problem when it comes to maths, but there has been a dramatic change in technology, to which my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards will refer when she replies.

Mr. Robathan: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I have just given way to the hon. Member for Maidenhead. If I give way constantly, I shall not be able to make a speech.

There is a 5 per cent. improvement overall in the take-up of places. Compared with two years ago, there is a 14 per cent. improvement in the take-up of secondary places, where the real problem arises because of the disparity of applications to vacancies in the sector.

Mr. Robathan: The right hon. Gentleman has quoted many statistics which may or may not be right. I am concerned about the retention of teachers. I shall be grateful if the right hon. Gentleman came to my constituency and to the school that I visited recently. I cannot swear to it, but I would judge that most of the teachers there voted Labour at the general election, believing that there was a brand new sunrise on the horizon. Instead, they found that it was a sunset. They have been hugely disappointed, and they laughed when I talked about what the Government were doing in schools. They could not wait to get out of teaching. Will the right hon. Gentleman explain to them why teaching is a good profession in which they should stay?

Mr. Blunkett: Yes. I invite them to send a delegation to meet me in my office—I shall be happy if the hon. Gentleman joins them. I shall then be able to tell them why it is worth being a teacher. I will be able to share with them what others are saying to us, which is why taking 450,000 youngsters from classes of more than 30 pupils is making things easier for the teaching profession. Eleven thousand schools are undergoing repairs and renewals. We are spending £1 billion on putting technology into schools. I refer to the computers that did not exist and the link to the internet that did not happen under the previous Government. These things are worth celebrating. These are successes that breed success.

Let us rejoice in what is working and let us be clear about what is not. Let us tackle the problems and have them solved. Let us not have rhetoric, backed up by letters read out in the Chamber, that demoralises the teaching profession rather than rejoicing in what is taking place. And yes, let us have discipline. This year, £174 million—which is a one-third increase—has been spent on ensuring that teachers and heads with disruptive children can get them out of the classroom and into support units where action can be taken, and do not dump them on the street to become drug addicts and drug pushers.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Like the Secretary of State, I shall not say anything that will undermine the recruitment or the position of teachers. I want to ask a simple question as a London Member of Parliament who also chairs a school governing body. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that many experienced teachers have difficulty coping with the level of bureaucracy? They perceive that it is increasing and that it takes more of their time, and it is a pressure that is driving some of them out of the profession or to think about leaving it. If the right hon. Gentleman does accept that, will he review seriously the frequency with which the Department for Education and Employment sends out circulars, issues paper and sends, either directly or through local education authorities, additional documents for teachers to consider? Surely we could reduce that to one or two occasions a year, so that for the rest of the year teachers and head teachers could concentrate on managing and teaching in their schools.

Mr. Blunkett: Yes, I accept that there is a problem with bureaucracy, paperwork and administration. That is

why we have set up a panel of heads and teachers to monitor the commitment that we have made that, from this September, we will cut the number of documents issued by a third and the amount of paper by a half. We will send out material in batches, and we will use electronic communication when that is suitable for heads. We will take similar steps with other agencies, such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and Ofsted, and with local authorities, so that requests for information are not duplicated. Data collection can be simplified and we can lift unnecessary burdens from heads and teachers.

There is still a long way to go, but I take no lessons on this issue from the Conservatives. They made a complete backside—a complete mess—of the introduction of the national curriculum and the assessment tests, they introduced Ofsted, and they set up the system of data collection for the tables to which we are committed. Those four measures alone placed more administrative requirements on heads and teachers than any paperwork that I have introduced, trebled. The paperwork that I have required includes the literacy and numeracy framework, advice to teachers on the "terrible" forms they have to fill in to get a £2,000 uplift in their salary, and advice on safety that we sent out two years ago and which the Opposition consider a bureaucratic infringement. Some things have to be done; some things have to be sent; and some things are necessary for consultation. However, too much has been sent out; too much has been required; and too much has to be read by teachers and heads rather than appropriate extracts or information available on the web.

We will continue to take action to ensure that we lessen the burden. In the end, paying teachers well, increasing the number of teachers, creating buildings that are fit to teach in with equipment that is fit to use, ensuring smaller class sizes, ensuring that the money is available to pay teachers at an advanced level to retain as well as recruit them, ensuring that heads get backing through the new leadership centre, and the other measures that we have put in place will all make a difference.

We will work with the Teacher Training Agency and the General Teaching Council, and with heads and local authorities across the country, to ensure that vacancies are filled, and that children get teachers with the qualifications and experience to do the job. The problems cannot be resolved by glib answers in a debate. That can be done only by concrete action to recruit young and old alike, and to make it worth being in the teaching profession. We should sing about what is working and tell every young person we meet that the teaching profession is the best way of fulfilling themselves and of making the next generation fit to live in this country.

8.14 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I congratulate the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) on choosing to raise such an important subject on a Supply day. I think that the whole House would whole-heartedly agree that without a supply of well qualified, well motivated, committed and well paid teachers we cannot expect standards to rise, social exclusion to diminish, underachievement to be tackled or society to have confidence in the education product.

There is a teacher shortage—a teacher crisis—in our schools, despite the protestations to the contrary by the Secretary of State this evening and by Baroness Blackstone in the other place last week. However, it is to the eternal credit of the teaching profession—and in particular, of the ingenuity of head teachers—that it has not made a drama out of a crisis.

The recent research by Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson of the university of Liverpool, entitled "Coping with Teacher Shortages" and "Talking Heads", gives us a graphic insight into the coping strategies of many schools. Those reports should be compulsory reading for all MPs, and certainly for the Secretary of State. The research helps to explain the paradox between what the Department for Education and Employment reports about teacher shortage and the actuality of what head teachers and governors find in their schools.

The hon. Member for Maidenhead read out a number of lines from the report "Talking Heads". They make amusing reading and make a cheap byline in such a debate, but they send out a stark warning that there is a limit to what can be done in our schools to paper over the real problems of teacher recruitment and retention.

Mrs. May: I am sure that when the hon. Gentleman reads *Hansard* tomorrow he will regret his remark that those deeply felt comments from teachers about the problems that they face were just a cheap byline in a debate. Will he withdraw that remark?

Mr. Willis: I certainly will not. I never regret what I say in the House; I choose my words carefully. The comments made in the Smithers report "Talking Heads" were well made—they were from committed teachers and were not intended to be used to make cheap political jibes in the House. They highlighted a difficult problem, and those teachers expected the House to take the issues that they raised seriously.

It is sad that the hon. Lady has chosen to link the important issue of teacher shortages with the nonsense of the Tory proposals for free schools. That was the only solution she offered—that free schools would solve the problems. What the hon. Lady did not mention in her litany was that private schools have the freedom to charge fees. There is a great difference between what private schools can do and what the state sector can do. The policy of free schools has been thought up by those barmy 14-pints-a-day folk in Conservative central office, who care not one jot about the state sector. What we have seen tonight are crocodile tears.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: No, I will not.

It is sad that not once did the hon. Lady acknowledge that the problem of teacher recruitment and retention began with previous Tory Governments. Between 1985 and 1990, every target set by the Tories for secondary recruitment was missed by a margin of 10 per cent. That is the reality of what was happening in the 1980s. Between 1993 and 1997, with the exception of 1991–94, the target for the recruitment of maths teachers was missed—by a staggering 21 per cent. in 1995–96 and an even more staggering 34 per cent. in 1996–97. The only time the previous Government met their targets for teacher recruitment was when Norman Lamont engineered the biggest economic depression since the war.

[Mr. Willis]

That is the reality. The only bonus of that policy was that at least teachers in London could afford to buy houses, because the housing market collapsed.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that at a recent union-arranged conference, he was criticised by the union chair for devoting the whole of his speech to an attack on the Conservative party, rather than making any constructive observations about what the Liberal party might come up with?

Mr. Willis: I seem to remember being cheered from the rafters at all the teachers conferences for the sensible, constructive and proactive stance that I took on those occasions.

Let us consider what happened during the Tory years. I make no apology for attacking the Tories for their policy, and for what happened during those years. It is small wonder that the number of teacher vacancies increased in each of the last three years of that Government, beginning a trend that has, sadly, continued ever since. No wonder the hon. Member for Maidenhead did not dwell too much on the past: the roots of the present crisis were firmly planted by her former colleagues.

When we examine Tory education policy before 1997, it is easy to see why teacher recruitment became a problem. Just look at the Tory record on pay during the previous Parliament. In debates such as this, it is important for us to remind the public of what happened in those Tory years before 1997. Only in 1992 and 1993 did the Tories fully fund the teachers' pay award as recommended by the review body. In 1992—a general election year—there was a recommendation for a 7.5 per cent. award, which, oddly enough, was paid in full. In 1993 there was a recommendation for a 1 per cent. award, plus restructuring. That too was paid in full, but for the remaining years of the previous Administration teachers had to put up with an award topped up by local education authorities making cuts elsewhere. In 1996 and 1997 they had to put up with the appalling arrangement of staged pay rises introduced by the last Government. That shows how much that Government valued teachers, and how much they wanted to encourage the profession.

It was not just lack of pay that put people off joining or staying in the teaching profession. It was the lack of promotion and career prospects; it was the ever increasing bureaucratic load imposed by the disastrous launch of the national curriculum—mentioned earlier by the Secretary of State—under the previous Secretary of State, John Patten; it was the intensive use of Ofsted, whose first round of inspections drove many teachers out of the profession because of the stress caused; and it was the changes in early retirement and pension arrangements, introduced by the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), which caused a massive exodus from the profession before the September 1997 deadline.

Furthermore, there was a lack of investment in school buildings, equipment and books, a lack of investment in professional development, and continued blocking of the General Teaching Council. It is worth pointing out that when the GTC was launched in September, not one Tory Front Bencher turned up at the launch. Indeed, not one Tory Member of Parliament turned up. It was left to the Minister for School Standards and me to represent the House.

The deliberate concentration of policy on grant-maintained schools and assisted places sent a clear message to would-be teachers that they would be joining a two-tier education system, consisting of a tier that the Government valued and a tier that they did not value. It is sad that a Labour Government who were so critical of the last Administration should adopt almost the same complacent attitude to teacher recruitment and retention.

In 1997, the Select Committee report "Teacher Recruitment: What can be done?" identified the problems that needed to be tackled. The Committee's Chairman, the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge)—who made a fleeting appearance this evening, and who is now a Minister—made it clear where the blame lay. On 18 February 1998 she said:

> The complacency shown by the previous Government about the problem of teacher supply is outrageous. They created a crisis in teacher recruitment.

She promised, however, that the Labour Government would sort that out:

> The Tories may have caused the problem, but Labour must solve it.—[*Official Report*, 18 February 1998; Vol. 306, c. 1021-22.]

The Government began solving it by imposing tuition fees on undergraduates.

Dr. Harris: And removing grants.

Mr. Willis: And removing grants. The net result was that BEd students had a minimum of £3,000 heaped on their shoulders, in addition to the average £10,000 debt that they incurred because of the removal of grants. I defy the Minister to explain how the introduction of tuition fees and the removal of benefits and grants could improve the supply of teachers.

The Government discouraged potential graduates from choosing a teaching career by introducing a culture of "name and shame", and a fear of failure. Imagine ICI or Arthur Andersen recruiting on that basis. They would be laughed out of court. This was also the Government who gave succour to Chris Woodhead when he launched his polemical attack on 15,000 failing teachers. He did not produce a shred of evidence, and not one Minister challenged his findings.

The Government have increasingly deprofessionalised teaching by telling teachers what to teach, when to teach and how to teach, and discouraging creativity in the classroom. They have created bureaucracy in schools with their target setting and central control, which send all the wrong messages to potential recruits. The net result has been an acceleration of the recruitment crisis in the past three years, and—equally significant—a dramatic increase in the desire to leave the profession.

I spent 34 years in the teaching profession. The Minister for School Standards spent 18 years in the profession. Such periods were not uncommon. According to an ICM poll this year, whose findings have been substantiated by various other polling organisations, half our teachers now want to leave within the next 10 years.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the average length of service is now only 15 years, and is dropping year after year. It is no surprise that the number of teachers leaving

the profession within five years has increased each year since 1994, and now stands at a staggering 5,000 a year. It is no surprise, either, that in the last two years the number of teachers leaving the profession, but not retiring, has increased by 30 per cent.: more than 3,000 have simply packed their bags and gone. Nor is it any surprise that, according to the September submission to the Department by the review body, schools now have 2,666 vacancies—the largest number since 1991, when there were 5,222.

Both *The Times Educational Supplement* and the Secondary Heads Association surveys showed, in September, that the real number of vacancies is much higher than that—some 4,000 in secondary schools alone. The Government's complacency, however, is as staggering as the Opposition's hypocrisy. Replying to my noble Friend the Baroness Sharp of Guildford, Lady Blackstone claimed that the crisis had been exaggerated. She should tell that to parents in Southwark, where today there is a 7 per cent. vacancy rate. In Tower Hamlets, 97 teachers are needed. In Hackney some schools do not even advertise posts, because they receive no response to their advertisements.

London is approaching meltdown in terms of teacher recruitment. Without the support of teachers from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, many London schools would have to close their doors, never mind working a four-day week. The problem is not confined to London, however. In Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton, 186 vacancies are currently reported. That is a 100 per cent. increase on the number two years ago. Even in more affluent Buckingham and Milton Keynes, 59 teachers are urgently required.

The hon. Member for Maidenhead spoke of 30,000 vacancies by 2004. That, of course, included the assumption that all 17,000 supply teachers would need to be replaced by permanent teachers—a somewhat exaggerated claim, as I am sure the hon. Lady would agree. However, she highlighted the admirable way in which many of our teachers manage their schools to overcome the lack of permanent staff. In January 1997, one in 25 teachers was either a temporary teacher or an instructor; today the figure is one in 20. The ingenuity of heads and their staff has enabled the Department to be as complacent as it is.

It would be wrong to say that the Government have done nothing. There has been a Green Paper on the future of the teaching profession, but a bungled threshold payment scheme has devalued what was essentially a sound proposal to reward service in the classroom.

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): The hon. Gentleman has never said that before.

Mr. Willis: I have always argued that teachers in the classroom should be paid more and that the career structure should keep teachers in the classroom. I am very pleased that the Government have listened to those cries.

Pay awards since 1998 have been met in full. There are promises to reduce bureaucracy, and we have heard the Secretary of State make them. I certainly would not accuse either him or his Ministers of not being sincere in their desire to recognise the worth of our teachers, but it will take much more than that to resolve the teacher shortage. The Government took two years to respond to the decline in applications for teacher training with golden hellos for key shortage subjects.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me because so far, in a 16-minute contribution, he has said precisely nothing about the need for good order in schools. Given the rising tide of violence by pupils against teachers throughout the country, does he agree with the Conservative Opposition that new guidelines on the legitimate use of physical restraint are urgently needed and that they should be based on the common-sense instincts of the majority of the British people, not on the permissive prejudices of the liberal establishment?

Mr. Willis: As ever, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. His interventions are always so interesting. However, he raises an important issue, and I shall treat it seriously. I do not share his jaundiced view of what happens in the vast majority of our schools. Of course, some students—I have met a few of them in my time—cause major problems for teaching staff and the rest of the school community, and of course it is right and proper that they should be treated properly. I am sure that the Minister recognises the folly of setting a target for the reduction of exclusions; it was nonsense. We must have a balanced programme, but the hon. Gentleman, with all his wisdom, does state schools no good by creating the impression that they are overrun with mindless thugs who do nothing but attack teachers, take drugs and burn down schools.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Further to the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), does the hon. Gentleman agree that emotional and behavioural difficulties represent the fastest growing area of special needs in schools? Although one can parody the situation, he knows that that is certainly a major concern for many teachers, especially those in inner cities.

Mr. Willis: May I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on taking up his place on the Conservative Front Bench? May his be a long and happy experience in opposition.

The hon. Gentleman, who has a genuine interest in special needs, is absolutely right to say that dealing with special needs children who also exhibit behavioural problems is a major problem. The Minister will agree that it is a sad statistic that those with a statement of special needs are seven times more likely to be excluded than those who have not, and that Afro-Caribbean youngsters are four times more likely to be excluded from schools. Those problems must be treated seriously, but that will not happen if we simply give heads a blanket excuse to get rid of such kids from their schools. We must create the sorts of innovative teaching and support mechanisms that allow youngsters with special needs to develop as productive members of society, rather than excluding them and making them outcasts. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree with those comments.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I share many of the Secretary of State's sentiments about the teaching profession and the glory of being a teacher, but does my

[Mr. Mike Hancock]

hon. Friend agree that lifting the burden from teachers so that they can spend more time in the classroom with children who have serious behavioural problems—and a little less time filling in the forms that are part of the bureaucratic nightmare that now accompanies teaching jobs—will go a long way towards lifting the burden in cities such as Portsmouth, and towards getting teachers to return to the profession in such places? I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that it is no good the Secretary of State saying that he will do that in future, because the teaching profession needs it to happen now.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention—and I am sure that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would agree with him as well. In reality, there is not a jot between the three major political parties about the need to get rid of bureaucracy in schools and allow teachers to teach. We need to tackle the previous Government's legacy of bureaucracy, and as a party, we have made it absolutely clear how we would tackle it. We should accept that creating time for teachers to teach is also an issue, especially in primary schools. The sadness is that most primary school teachers are committed to a full-time teaching load five days a week. That makes it exceptionally difficult to spend time with disruptive children or those with special needs, and to do the work required to prepare the curriculum and the lessons.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willis: I should like to finish the point—and then we could stay until midnight.

The Liberal Democrats have asked the Secretary of State to ensure that all primary teachers timetables include the non-contact time to enable them to tackle some of those issues, and that each primary class has a classroom assistant. Those sensible proposals would do much to enable teachers to have more contact time with youngsters, bring teachers back into primary schools and give them the time to work with their pupils.

Mr. McWalter *rose—*

Mr. Willis: I want to make progress, because I am conscious that other hon. Members wish to speak.

I have mentioned that the Government took two years to recognise the crisis and introduce golden hellos, and three years to introduce training grants—a proposal that my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) made in response to a Select Committee report about four years ago.

Dr. Harris: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Mr. Willis: I have just said that I would not take an intervention; I should like to finish my speech.

It is important that we recognise that neither golden hellos nor the training grants have resolved the crisis, despite wildly optimistic claims. The DFEE rightly states that applications have increased, but the number of acceptances in the key shortage areas are down—4 per cent. fewer for maths, 13 per cent. fewer for physics and no increase for chemistry. Those are crucial subjects in the curriculum. We should not simply refer to applications; we must consider those who were accepted.

Ad hoc policies do not tackle the shortages that exist elsewhere in the system. The primary sector crisis is especially acute in special needs, particularly in London, where one in 20 classes do not have a specialist teacher. That is unacceptable. Although Government policy has produced more trainees for science, there is a huge imbalance in favour of biologists. In 1997, the Select Committee urged the Government to operate a more comprehensive, transparent planning system for teacher supply. That simply has not happened. I hope that the Minister will commit herself to making that system possible. We have the same stop-go teacher recruitment policies that we had 10 or 15 years ago, and that is unacceptable. In the past it may have been possible simply to respond to economic cycles. Today it is not. We must recognise that education is in the marketplace for the best graduates. We must respond to that marketplace.

I urge the Government to look more imaginatively at solving teacher shortages and not to rely simply on importing skills from abroad. May we encourage universities to offer all undergraduates a teaching component in their degrees to encourage them to acquire and to use skills in schools and colleges? Let us rethink the package of incentives and create a £10,000 training salary for all postgraduate trainee teachers, with clear contractual safeguards. Let us encourage mature entrants into the profession with realistic financial support packages, so that they can make the transition from industry to the classroom.

Let us support teachers in deprived or high-cost areas such as London with a realistic package of housing and travel benefits, and can we recognise that we must have competitive staffing salaries if we are to attract teachers? Above all, let us make teaching the attractive career that I believe it is. The Minister and I spent many years in the teaching profession. It is a proud tradition, and it is at the root of our society. I trust that the Minister will give us assurances as to how we will meet our requirements for the future.

8.41 pm

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), not a near neighbour, but a neighbour of mine in Yorkshire. It is a pleasure to follow his speech because it ended with some constructive suggestions. As Chairman of the Education Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on Education and Employment, I am rather proud to look back at the early report that it published, not under my chairmanship, but under the Chairman before me, entitled, "Teacher Recruitment: What can be done?" It made some positive suggestions about a pathway for the future.

What is disappointing is that I was looking at the membership and it included the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May). Unfortunately—I have to say this; I do not want to be too partisan—I heard her make very few constructive suggestions about why we have a problem with teacher recruitment and what we should do about it. I hope to look at some of the deeper reasons for problems and the reasons why we have not gone far or fast enough, given that good October 1997 report.

I re-read that report. I then read the Government's response to it. All of us would admit that Select Committees, which I am proud of, make very good reports and that Governments do not always give a 100 per cent. positive response to them. In the case of that report, the Government did not, but, to be fair, a very high percentage of the report's suggestions were acted on. Although "could do better" would be my judgment on overall performance, there were some significant, positive responses to the report.

I was trying to think about the underlying reasons for our problems in teacher selection, recruitment and retention. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment mentioned retention, which is so important—retention at every level. Why do many more men drop out of teacher training courses? Why, after five years, are only—estimates vary—between 60 and 70 per cent. of teachers still in the profession? We must look at that carefully.

What I started with is the awfulness of the political debate. If we had a bunch of teachers watching the debate—many will be watching us on television—what view will they have of the useless hyperbole that is used? What good does it do? My old friend the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough is guilty of it, too. Like the Leader of the Opposition, he talked about meltdown.

To be honest and fair about the present situation, there is a problem with teacher recruitment. It is not the worst that we have ever had. I have obtained figures from the House of Commons Library. Ten years ago, the position was more than twice as bad as it is today. I think that there was a 1.8 per cent. recruitment lag. The latest figures show that there is a 0.8 per cent. lag.

There was a significantly worse situation in 1989. Interestingly—we are all sensible people in the Chamber—that recruitment lag was also at a high point in the economic cycle. We all know that there is a high point in the economic cycle. We cannot walk past a shop without people advertising for people to work. Everywhere we look, there are advertisements in the newspapers. Graduate employment is a competitive market.

There are more and more jobs and more diverse careers than ever before. We have relied on women to be the backbone of our teaching force and have often taken them for granted. For many years until not that long ago, often, when a bright young woman was leaving school and going to university, the advice that she got was that there were only three careers for her to go into: nursing, teaching and becoming a secretary. Thank God—I have to admit that I have three daughters and a son—those days are in the past.

Only on Monday evening, I was talking to the head of a large girls school. She said that she had just come back from making a speech at another girls school, where she said, "You as women can do any job in the world that you are physically capable of and that you have the intellect for." A few years ago, people would have scoffed at the suggestion of a female astronaut, let alone females in every profession. Jobs are becoming more open and more challenging, and more attractive not only to young women graduating, but to men. There is a competitive marketplace.

I suppose that, if we are going to stay in the world of economic reality, one of the answers is that we must pay teachers competitive rates. I was digging out work by the 1953-55 royal commission on public service that considered the public sector and public sector pay. There was a serious attempt to work out what had to be paid in the public sector to attract and to retain talented people. It is about time that we as politicians and Governments looked more carefully at the realistic pay that we must give teachers to retain them. It must be seriously competitive. That is the reality.

Surely something could have come from the Opposition. They purport to be the experts on business, competitiveness and the real world of the private sector. Surely we should have heard some word about the reality of having to pay the price. In many areas, the Government have responded to that. I know that performance-related pay is controversial between the parties, but I believe that it is a significant change towards giving teachers the opportunity to increase their pay.

Dr. Harris: I always enjoy listening to the erudite hon. Gentleman who chairs the Select Committee on which I serve. What example does it set, for young women in particular looking for a career in teaching or academia, when the Government seem willing to tolerate a pay gap in academic salaries, which is surely unacceptable, year after year?

Mr. Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman knows that I agree with him and that I agree with the findings of the Bett report. We have to pay university teachers better and ensure that women get the same opportunities and pay as men. I will be campaigning shoulder to shoulder with the hon. Gentleman on that issue.

I must talk about the hyperbole used during the debate. Some hon. Members have talked about a meltdown. That term applies to a nuclear disaster and is inappropriate language in this context. We have also heard from another Back Bencher about the rising tide of violence. That is also inappropriate. It is not what I find that teachers believe to be the reality in schools up and down the country. When politicians use such cheap hyperbole they do no justice to the education system that we are trying to promote.

I have been in the House for a long time and I listened attentively over 18 years in Opposition as the Conservative Ministers made strong statements about the problems of public education. I listened a great deal more attentively when I knew that those Ministers sent their children to public sector state schools and not to schools in the private sector. For too long, too many Conservative Members talked about the problems in the state sector when they had no intention of ever sending their child anywhere near a public sector state school.

Mr. Bercow: Of course one should not use hyperbole, but neither should one ignore the facts as they are presented. Is the hon. Gentleman denying that violent assaults on teachers by pupils—it is only a minority of pupils—are on the increase? In Southampton, to give just one example, the rate doubled between 1998 and 1999. What a disservice the hon. Gentleman does to his constituents and the country by denying what everybody else knows to be the case.

Mr. Sheerman: My point is that if we put things into perspective, we do more justice to the electorate. I wanted

[Mr. Sheerman]

to mention that one of the reasons for the problem in attracting teachers is providing them with a decent and safe environment in which to teach. That is important and in my previous speech during a debate such as this I mentioned the real problem of attracting men into teaching when spurious allegations about their relationship with pupils can destroy their lives. That is a real problem. The difference between the hon. Gentleman's approach and mine is the need to put matters into perspective.

We should not generalise and say that every school is a blackboard jungle—some of us recall the famous film—because that is not the case. There is a problem, which we should meet with sensible policies. We should ensure that the teaching environment is safe, modern, pleasant and secure so that teachers can get on with teaching.

There has been a great deal of talk about bureaucracy. The Select Committee report talks about bureaucracy and red tape. There is no doubt that the Government have not done as much as they should, as fast as they should. However, we should not hear about a "bureaucratic nightmare", which is what we heard from the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock). I visit schools all the time and I know that there are problems, but it is not a nightmare. It is hyperbole that upsets serious debate.

It would not be me if I did not say that one of the problems is the inspection system. It is not that there is not a good inspection system, which I applaud and want to see continue, but the style of inspection upsets teachers. We must have a genuine effort from Her Majesty's inspectorate to be seen to be more co-operative and working in partnership with schools, to help schools to meet and maintain high standards. It does no one any good if the inspectorate is misperceived. I think that the inspector has some work to do on that, and I shall be making that point to him when he appears before our Committee a week from today.

Violence and intimidation in the classroom cannot be tolerated. However, we have to get the exclusion balance right. There is no point in excluding students who consequently go into crime and drugs and cause tremendous problems in our society. There has to be a balance. My own preference—I have been involved in the issue in my own local schools—is to have special units within or very close to the school; rather than to exclude people from the school campus.

Therefore, although I agree that the problems are real, there is a measured response that goes beyond a school saying, "You are excluded", and having no further responsibility for that excluded student. The more successful schools and local education authorities have a very good and measured response to the problem of exclusion. If we could all reach the best standards in dealing with exclusion, we would all be doing very well indeed.

It is very easy to jump on bandwagons. In the past two or three years, I have seen a bandwagon—involving not only the Opposition, but other people—that seeks always to criticise and bash local education authorities. However, when I go round schools, one of the things that teachers and heads say to me is, "We have a very good local education authority here, and we value its support."

There are rather more people with special educational needs in state schools—in ordinary schools, which most British pupils attend—than in the private sector. State schools also have problems with disruptive pupils. Those problems, however—like the overall task of school management—are dealt with far better and more easily at the local education authority level.

There are long-term problems in recruiting teachers, and hon. Members would be foolish to ignore or deny that fact. There is, however, sensible action that we can be taking to solve those problems. Indeed, many of the problems were dealt with in the Select Committee report that we published three years ago and would be willing to update if necessary. Much has been done, but more needs to be done. We would serve Britain's great teaching profession and Britain's pupils far better if we cut the hyperbole and worked together on common-sense solutions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next hon. Member to speak, may I say that many hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, but that we are fast running out of time in this debate? Unless speeches are brief, very many hon. Members will be very disappointed.

8.58 pm

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): In the light of your strictures, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall certainly seek to confine my remarks to less than 10 minutes.

Given that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), in a speech that was interesting overall, touched on both the importance of the teaching profession's historical reliance on women and the subject of teachers' pay, I should perhaps declare an interest. My wife is a teacher in a state secondary school, and has spent her entire teaching career in state schools.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that we must avoid hyperbole. Equally, however, we must not disguise the genuine problems that are being faced by people in the teaching profession. Various hon. Members have said that it is very easy to describe problems and not to talk about solutions. I should like to discuss just one very important solution, and say that politicians of all parties should recognise that they have a role in achieving that solution.

I fully accept that my party in government was guilty of this to some extent and on some occasions, but politicians of all parties have found it rather too easy, rather too often to treat the teaching profession as a political punch-bag, to attack teachers in general and to give the impression that it is entirely legitimate and appropriate in seeking to root out the minority of teachers who are failures somehow to characterise all teachers as failures. We ought instead to take a leaf out of their book. Almost any teacher would say that children—this applies to adults, too—will flower far more if they are given a bit of praise than if they are admonished, punished and disciplined for failure.

Perhaps hon. Members on both sides of the House should give a little more praise to those who have the difficult and incredibly important task of teaching our children and recognise that we should take pride in teaching and the fact that so many people want to be involved in it. We should encourage teachers and make

them feel wanted. I acknowledge that the Government have taken a few initiatives in that respect, but I believe that they too have fallen into the political trap of criticising the teaching profession or giving the impression of doing so. If we sent a more balanced message from this place, we would find that some of the problems of teacher recruitment and retention would begin to resolve themselves. Taking into account factors such as salaries and paperwork, we must let teachers feel that they are valued, supported and appreciated for what they do.

I also want to say a word about supply teachers. The Secretary of State did say something about this topic. Of course supply teachers play an important role and we should not denigrate some schools reliance on them, but I was disturbed to read a report in *The Guardian* on 5 September that pupils in one inner-city secondary school have been taught by 13 different maths teachers in one year. Teachers would agree that that is deeply disturbing for the obvious reason that it takes four or five weeks at the start of a term for a teacher to build up any sort of meaningful relationship with all the pupils in his or her class. A supply teacher cannot do that in one or two days. Teachers often find that pupils will not respond, however effective the teaching may be, unless they feel that the teacher has some sense of who they are and their individual interests and problems. Supply teachers often try extremely hard, but it is far better, wherever possible, for teachers to be full-term and full-time. I see that the Minister agrees.

Another problem—again I accept that it did not start in 1997, although I genuinely believe that it has got worse since then—is the pressure on teachers in respect of paperwork, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) mentioned, and targets. I fully accept that targets did not start in May 1997, but they have expanded and become more onerous.

I do not know whether the Minister has seen an interesting and sobering report that appeared in *The Guardian* in July relating to what was described as the various games that teachers play in order to manipulate the statistics that are reported to LEAs or to the Department for Education and Employment. Let me say immediately that I am not seeking to fall into the trap of saying that teachers are devious, unreliable and try to fix things and that the inspectorate should come down on them like a ton of bricks. I am trying to make a rather different point. Let me quote one or two examples.

The Guardian reported on a class of 18 children who had three things in common: they were all studying "Macbeth" for GCSE English, they had all turned in essays for course work and not one of them had written a single word of that course work. It had all been done by the teacher, or in one case by the teacher and her husband. The teacher was quoted as saying:

> I do it for two reasons. First, you give the kid a chance and second, you don't get beaten over the head.

Another example from the same article referred to the comments of an Ofsted inspector, who had been a teacher, in relation to SATs. He said that secondary heads usually knew which primary heads were fiddling because the children arrived and could not work to the level of their SATs results. He said that fiddling at key stage 2 was probably pretty widespread and that policing was very weak. He went on to talk about the same thing happening with GCSEs and further up the scale.

It is possible to interpret that as meaning that there is widespread fiddling, although I do not believe that that is happening. It is also possible to interpret it as meaning that we should crack down on teachers. I do not believe that that is the right answer either. Although I do not want the Minister to think I am claiming that we have an authoritarian Government, we are in danger of creating something analogous to what used to happen in the Soviet Union, where the standard joke was, "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us"; or what happens in quantum physics, when one is told firmly that the act of measuring something changes what you are measuring; or the fundamental mistake that the Americans made in Vietnam, which was to try to fight a war according to statistics—they believed for years that they were winning because they kept getting statistics in the Pentagon about the number of Vietcong they had killed, when the reality was very different.

Is it not at least possible that in trying to constrain the teaching profession to a range of statistics and tests for a noble reason—to try to lever up standards for every child in the country, which is an objective I share—we are lowering standards by depriving teachers of the freedom they need to teach?

Ms Estelle Morris: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. Normally, I would not intervene on a 10-minute speech. He is making a thoughtful speech and I particularly applaud him for the way he has tried to give a balanced view and to praise teachers. Can I confirm that he was not suggesting that widespread fiddling is going on at key stage 2 tests? I do not believe that he would want to give that impression, but I fear that when he comes to read *Hansard* he may find that he has.

Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is a wide range of measures in place to ensure that tests are administered fairly? A group that looked at the quality of key stage 2 tests only last year—a group to which his own party made a nomination—said that, on the whole, tests are the standard that they have always been and are administered fairly. Not to stress that is to undermine teachers and pupils in the very way he has been seeking to avoid in his speech.

Mr. Collins: I will be happy to look back at what I said in *Hansard*. I quoted an Ofsted inspector who, in turn, was quoted in *The Guardian* as referring to widespread fiddling. I believe that I made it clear earlier—I am happy to confirm it again—that I do not believe that fiddling is widespread. However, I think that there is a genuine problem with the burdens placed on teachers. That is what I am asking the Minister to reflect on.

Earlier, the Secretary of State said that, at times, he contemplated following the example of a teacher and giving up to go to the Lake district. On behalf of the Lake district—part of which I am happy to represent—may I say that I hope he will not be seeking to bring his career to quite such a premature end? However, I issue an invitation to him or any other DFEE Minister to come to the Lake district and talk to some of the hard-working teachers in the excellent south Cumbrian secondary schools who would like to talk to a Minister about these points. I hope that it will be possible for Ministers to come soon to do that.

9.8 pm

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): I welcome the opportunity to debate the current problems of supply and recruitment of teachers. However, the speech from the Opposition Front Bench by the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) disappointed me enormously, as it seemed to be another excuse to lower the morale of teachers and make matters worse. It can take up to four years to train a qualified teacher, so many of the problems that we are experiencing now can be traced back directly to the failure of the previous Conservative Administration to provide the additional funding or to restructure initial training in the 1990s.

I have particular reason to speak in this debate as Corby community college in my constituency has had to establish a temporary four-day week as a result of the difficulties that it has recently experienced in recruiting permanent staff. I have met many parents in recent weeks and I share their deep concern about the impact of the four-day week on their children's education as well as the supervision of the children during study days at home. The school's head teacher and staff, along with the education authority and Corby's education action zone, neighbouring schools and, indeed, the Government are working hard together in this difficult period to provide a stable, well-balanced curriculum in the school and support for students who have to stay at home to study.

That fresh start school was created from the merger of two schools in Corby, both of which had falling standards and numbers as a result of Conservative underfunding and neglect in the 1990s. They were failing their children despite the best efforts of their staff. The decision to give those children a fresh start at a new school was therefore right, and we all look forward to the school moving to a new purpose-built site next September, for which it has received £3 million of Government expenditure. That launch will provide a real fresh start for the school.

In the past nine months, the local education authority and the school have worked vigorously to fill those posts with experienced, enthusiastic and committed teachers. Regrettably, however, the wider national shortage of teachers, which everyone in the Chamber acknowledges, has had a disproportionate impact on a school that, inevitably, is going through a difficult period. Right now, the school, the LEA, the education action zone and other schools are working together, with the support of the Government, to establish as quickly as possible a team of temporary teachers with the strength, quality and consistency to develop good relationships with the pupils.

I am pleased to say that the LEA has provided additional help through Northamptonshire's inclusion and pupil support service, and the inspectorate and advisory staff have worked with the staff and management of the school to develop and improve the curriculum. We all want the school to get back to normal as soon as possible, and if the interim measures are successful I hope that we can hit the target of 13 November or an even earlier date.

Of course, the key issue is recruiting permanent staff so that the school has a full complement of talented individuals committed to every child in it. I therefore hope that the new recruitment drive will be successful. The LEA has helped by seconding a personnel officer to work in the school, and additional recruitment and retention allowances for all staff are being discussed to ensure greater stability.

The recruitment campaign has already attracted 66 inquiries, and 22 applicants will be interviewed by the school in the next few days. The Government have helped by discussing with the Teacher Training Agency how the school can make the best use of the graduate training scheme. The Government, the LEA, the education action zone and the school are therefore working together to ensure that the permanent posts are filled by January.

That approach is in stark contrast to the divisive opportunism of the Conservative party. I am sad that the hon. Member for Maidenhead, the Opposition's education spokesperson, refused to apologise for the damage that she did when she parachuted into Corby on a campaigning trip. Corby people were not impressed by the hon. Lady's statements in the press that she was critical of giving Corby children a fresh start. She made no apology for the Tories' failure to recruit and train sufficient teachers when they were in office and called for the abolition of LEAs at the very time that the school was relying on the LEA for support, as I have described. She did not offer Corby a single constructive proposal to help the college in its present difficulties. Tonight's Opposition motion does not include a single constructive proposal, either.

Let us be clear: if the LEA had been abolished and the education action zone closed down as the Tories propose, Corby community college—which is doing its best, but is struggling—and every other school needing such support would have no one left to turn to. I am convinced that by working with others, and with Government support, the college will be a real success. We have come a long way in Corby in the three years since Labour came to office and, for the first time in many years, school standards are rising and young people are looking forward to new job prospects and future training. GCSE results are up, not falling as the Opposition said.

Lodge Park school in my constituency was not visited, but it is one of the most improved secondary schools in the country. Corby primary schools are showing rapid improvements in their SATs results. We are getting tremendous support, not just from the Government and the LEA but from local businesses, voluntary organisations and others, through the Corby-wide education action zone. That is worth £1 million a year in additional resources to deliver targeted projects and raise standards. Most important, it helps to create a different culture, in which schools work together and give each other mutual support.

That is an example of Labour delivering in Corby. Children and schools there are just beginning to emerge from the dark days of the previous Tory Government, when a few children benefited from extra resources but too many were left to struggle on in schools that were underfunded and left unsupported by an uncaring Conservative Government.

The Opposition's public services guarantee means that the Tories would have to cut 15,000 teachers and scrap the Government's class size policy. The 6,000 teachers who have been employed to reduce class sizes would go. As the debate this evening has shown, the Tories have no commitment to matching our spending on standards.

The Tories have said that they would abolish LEAs, so there would be no support, help or advice from that quarter for schools. They say that the free market should rule, but that would only create sink schools doomed to failure. In Corby, that would once more condemn children

to wasted lives and missed opportunities. We would lose out on the £3 million investment in the Corby community college, there would be no support for an education action zone, and even the sure start programme helping younger children would go.

I stand here tonight on behalf of parents and students at Corby community college and of every family in Corby to tell the Government what we have achieved so far and to ask for more. We want 100 per cent. more. We are going places in Corby and we are beginning to see the real potential of Corby's children, but we have a lot more to do. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past and let our children down again.

9.16 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I shall gabble through my speech, as I hope that the next Labour Member called to speak will do the same and thereby give my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) a chance to contribute to the debate.

I wish to declare an interest—even though the Chairman of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges does not seem to think that it is necessary to do so any longer. Two of my three daughters are primary school teachers, and of course I want them to enjoy the best possible conditions. My eldest daughter has been teaching for two years, and the other two both finished four-year courses at university this year, although one took a year out beforehand. One has been working on teacher training for all four years of her course and has never been able to receive any salary, while the other did a business degree sandwich course that involved a year out in industry, for which she was paid. Both have now taken their first jobs.

My youngest daughter has gone into a marketing job and, needless to say, her salary is 25 per cent. higher than that commanded by teachers. Teachers' pay must be looked at carefully. As the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) said, women now go into all sorts of jobs. We cannot expect them any more to be a cheap supply of employees for jobs such as teaching.

However, I want to be positive about what I say. It is important that more men should be encouraged to go into teaching, especially in primary schools, where there are not enough men to act as male role models. We must remember that many children belong to families in which there is no man to help care for them. That makes the goal of recruiting more male teachers doubly important.

Another matter that deserves careful consideration is how we can get more mature people to go into teaching. It is great that we can send people off on teacher-training courses lasting four years, but I am worried that the Government are encouraging people to do direct degrees, with an extra golden handshake to do a fourth year of teacher training. I fear that that might be divisive—that people going into teaching will do so by the least costly route and take advantage of the bonus in the fourth year. However, there is the danger that people who have spent three years on direct degrees will decide not to go into teaching after the fourth year. The policy might therefore turn out to have a negative effect.

In the primary sector in particular, mature men and women should be able to enter teaching or come back to it by taking shortened courses that give them a suitable qualification. There are many teaching assistants in schools who are frustrated at being in very low-paid jobs and would like to progress with their training to become teachers. Why not ensure that some of the schemes that have already started are expanded to allow them to do that?

Despite the massive shortage of teachers, many local education authorities are giving teachers temporary contracts. It will not encourage people who are looking for their first job to persevere if they know that, when they find it, conditions will not be ideal. Why, when there is such a shortage of teachers, do many schools give teachers temporary contracts when they start?

On the shortage of teachers in the inner cities and the expense of living there, the Government already give a much higher standard spending assessment for inner-city areas, particularly those with social problems and certainly in the centre of London. Yet that money is not translated into vastly increased salaries for the people who work in those areas. Teachers get a couple of thousand pounds extra for working in the middle of London, and that is frankly inadequate. We must tackle that problem.

We hear talk about getting all schools on to the internet, but people seem to have forgotten that information technology in schools can be used to teach children, particularly mathematics. Some wonderful computer programs are available that might make the limited number of teachers in those specialities more productive. They could supervise more, and IT technicians could help to ensure that the programs are working properly.

A constituent of mine told me that she loved her first teaching job but arrived home in tears a number of times because of the pressure of all the paperwork, and so on. Information overload is an extremely important factor.

Teachers tell me that they have one set of paperwork that they work to and another set that they keep in a drawer for when, in three or four years, Ofsted will come round. When a school is to be Ofsteded, for six months prior to that inspection—or for however long the notice period is—it changes whole way in which it teaches to get through the inspection. That seems bonkers. We must encourage schools to run themselves in the same way they always do when Ofsted inspectors are present.

Of course violence is not rife in schools. Dorset has peaceful schools. However, head teachers tell me that they lose a great deal of money if they properly exclude a pupil from school, because there is an incentive to keep children in school. If schools go over the Government target, they lose money that would have been paid as a bonus for keeping in school children who should perhaps have been excluded.

Finally, it is quite extraordinary that, while the Secretary of State has been trying to get more funds into schools and to bypass LEAs, the Liberal Democrats, who have controlled Dorset for the past seven years, are not passing the funds on to the schools. Dorset gets one of the lowest SSAs in the area and has the worst reputation of almost any LEA for not passing the money down. After all, we cannot pay teachers more money and put more resources into schools unless the money gets there.

I have gabbled through my speech, as I said that I would, and I hope that Labour Members will do the same.

9.24 pm

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I am immensely proud of what the Government have achieved in all aspects of education. In many respects, it has been the Government's greatest success.

This is an important debate about the future of teachers and the teaching profession. In the light of that, I was rather disappointed by the remarks of the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), who said that standards in schools were falling. That is not the case. We should celebrate the work of teachers, because teachers are improving standards in schools, despite the many problems with recruitment. We should congratulate teachers on their work, often in difficult circumstances—for example, in meeting the needs of bright pupils and those with special needs and in implementing the Government's numeracy and literacy strategies. We depend on our teachers to make all those policies work.

We should recognise the outstanding work of our teachers. If we repeat that constantly in this place, we shall change the climate for recruitment to the teaching profession. We shall get away from one of the most awful statements—one that I am sure we have all heard: "I wouldn't recommend that you go into teaching." It is essential in debates such as this that we celebrate the work of our teachers.

It is also important that we should set out our vision of what should be happening in teaching. That is another reason why I found the hon. Lady's remarks disappointing. Yes, we should applaud the fact that pupils succeed in obtaining five GCSEs at A to C grades, but, every time the grades improve, we should not tell teachers that the exams must have been easier. That undermines teachers.

Furthermore, we should sing loudly the praises of those teachers who work day in and day out to ensure that kids from difficult backgrounds obtain even one or two GCSEs, or that, after hard work, grades go up from F to E. It is incumbent on all of us to celebrate the achievement of all pupils—whether in primary or secondary schools—at all levels and that we recognise the work put in by their teachers.

Similarly, some teachers do an amazing job dealing with behavioural problems. They work with young people in very difficult circumstances, reducing the number of exclusions and the rate of truancy. We need to ensure that we acknowledge that work, as well as recognising achievement at the top. By doing that, we shall also change the climate in which teachers work.

Teacher recruitment is a difficult issue. The Government realised that and implemented various initiatives to try to tackle it. Other initiatives and policies will help the teaching profession in the long run. I passionately believe that the new pay and performance structure for teachers will produce a better profession in the long term and will give teachers an improved career progression.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) seems to have moved slightly in his position on that point, as we all have. The crucial aspect of performance pay is that, for the first time, we reward teachers for being good teachers and do not tell them that, in order to get promoted, they have to take on management responsibilities outside the classroom. The Government have implemented that vital reform; it will make a great difference.

The reduction in class sizes will also make a real difference. Why are class sizes going down? Above all, it is because we are employing more teachers, but we are also employing more classroom assistants.

Poor behaviour has been mentioned. Yes, there are problems, but the Government have refused to turn their back on kids who are causing problems in schools. We will not just dump them; we will support them in learning support units in schools and in improved pupil referral units outside schools. I hope that Ministers will take on board the need to speak to those young people who are causing problems in schools about their experiences, to see what can be done to change the curriculum and the way that schools operate so as to help those youngsters to determine their future.

Finally, I fail to see how the Conservative policy advanced in some of the literature that is distributed—specifically, the idea of free schools, which will allow every school to set its own admissions policy, pay and conditions policy and discipline policy—will improve standards in school and raise teachers' morale. It is absolute nonsense. When teachers realise that the "set schools free" policy that the Conservatives are proposing will mean a return to selection and a smashing of the national pay and conditions for all teachers throughout the country, they will make a judgment on which policies they would prefer, especially when it comes to the next general election.

9.30 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): My family has been exposed to both the independent and the maintained sector in our schools, in common with many of my constituents and in common with many colleagues in my party and throughout the country. That is why, while the Labour class warriors want to build barriers between the independent and state sectors, we want to build bridges and, because we want to build bridges, we have achieved in the past few years new ideas that will take our education system forward. That is why the teaching unions—the professionals—are paying a new attention to the thoughts of the Conservatives in education today.

I pay credit to the Secretary of State. I do not think that he is as much of a class warrior as he used to be. He has tried to endorse the Conservative reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. His problem is that he shows all the zeal of a convert and takes all our ideas far too far, to the extent that he drives teachers away from the classroom and away from their schools, because he tries to tell them what to do every living moment of the day.

The key point behind free schools is that we believe that the head teachers, not the politicians, should be in charge of their schools. Teachers, not political correctness, should rule in the classroom. In contrast, the Secretary of State appears to want to be the head teacher in every school in the country, and that top-down direction is driving away teachers in droves.

I am aware of the need for flexibility over pay, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I apologise, Mr. Speaker, and I take the opportunity to congratulate you on your elevation.

The role of free schools will mean that flexibility over pay will be at the school level. It takes a peculiar sort of genius for a Government to come up with a £2,000 offer

for teachers that teachers feel that they have to turn down because the terms and conditions are so convoluted, and so off-putting to the teaching profession. Many of them took the Government to court for the way that they are trying to implement their policy.

We have heard from the Minister for School Standards of a skills shortage in our economy causing a shortage of teachers. She has not mentioned in previous speeches—perhaps she will deal with it tonight—that the failure of her Government to follow the involvement of the private sector and further education colleges in putting more people through training is at the heart of the skills shortage throughout our economy today. The number of those passing through FE colleges in the past three years has now fallen a cumulative 500,000 short of the level that would have been achieved if she had maintained the productivity and output of the FE sector that she and her Government inherited from the Conservative Government in 1997. Because we have 500,000 fewer trained people in the economy, we now have more than 1 million vacancies.

Of course the teaching profession is suffering as potential teachers are drawn away by higher pay in the private sector, caused by that failure. In my constituency, that problem could not be more acute. Unless that shortage of teachers, and the high cost of living in places like Guildford, are addressed by the Government urgently, there will be an even more serious problem in some of the parts of the country that are the engine of the economy, in that it will be impossible to deliver the teaching that our country desperately needs.

9.35 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): This has been a short but good debate on a subject of real concern to head teachers, teachers and, increasingly, to parents, too. We have heard some excellent speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) made a sincere and appropriate appreciation of teachers. My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) made several valuable points about mature entrants to the profession and my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) made important points about teachers in schools in his constituency. We also heard an interesting and thoughtful speech from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), as well as contributions from the hon. Members for Corby (Mr. Hope) and for Gedling (Mr. Coaker).

In his introduction, the Secretary of State followed in the footsteps of Baroness Blackstone by, once again, raising the question of whether there was a crisis at all. "Crisis? What crisis?" neatly sums up the Secretary of State's attitude. The most potent evidence of that is that the only cheep of opposition that we heard from the Liberal Democrats was that the Secretary of State had been complacent. Everything else was a paeon of praise from the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). We now know why the Liberal Democrats are so utterly feeble towards the Labour party; but if they describe the Government as complacent, that must be so.

It will not do for the Secretary of State somehow to suggest that the problem is localised in London. The problem takes its most severe form in London and we have heard stories of London authorities scouring the world for teachers. They have been searching for them in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Malaysia, Dubai and Namibia, to name but a few countries, and the London borough of Southwark is even reported to have sent recruiters to the Munich beer festival last month. That is not so much a golden as a liquid hello.

I have referred to the problems of the London authorities, but the general secretary of the Secondary Heads Association discussed the matter in *The Guardian*. I hope that the Secretary of State will not take too much offence at the general secretary's words, because he used the word "crisis" and said:

> The recruitment crisis is the worst we have seen. We are no longer talking about just London, but also Birmingham, Nottingham, Hull and Manchester.

According to the website of *The Times Educational Supplement* nearly three out of four heads said that recruitment was getting worse. For example, the head of the beacon school in Banstead, Surrey described the situation as "catastrophic". The Secretary of State suggested that Cumbria was one area in which there may not be problems, but he should listen to the words of John Wilson head of Wyndham school in Egremont, Cumbria, who said:

> You don't recruit teachers now—you hunt them.

All the evidence is that the position is getting worse with supply teachers being used for long periods, teachers having to teach subjects other than their own and teachers coming from overseas. A recent survey by Liverpool university of 923 schools found that half had recruitment problems. It revealed geographers teaching business studies, biologists teaching chemistry and religious studies staff teaching maths. Mr. Speaker, you and I are both great believers in the power of prayer but, in maths examinations, a little mathematical knowledge comes in useful too.

The problems are set to get even worse in the future. The Government made much of the introduction of golden hellos, which were introduced in September 1999, and earlier this year of the introduction of the training bursary. Therefore, let us consider what has happened to the number of graduates accepting places in teacher training colleges in the past few years. In the last two years—this will interest the hon. Member for Corby, who suggested that the whole problem was the result of the previous Conservative Government—the number of graduates recruited for teaching in secondary schools was below the number recruited in 1997 and way below the target set by the Government for the number of teachers required. In the academic year just commenced, it appears that the total number recruited is slightly up on last year, but still below the Government's target and below the numbers being recruited by the previous Government at the end of their period in office.

The hon. Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) made the worst contribution to the debate—she got her facts all wrong. In 1994, the then Government were recruiting more maths teachers than their target required. Recruitment has slumped since then and this Government are way below their target. In this academic year, the number of maths and physics graduates has fallen again. The Government are also way below their target for technology graduates.

We understand that the Minister for School Standards will give us some good news about technology, so perhaps she will tell us whether the Government are meeting their target and whether the numbers recruited

[Mr. James Clappison]

are as high as they were in 1997. Last year, there was a 41 per cent. shortfall in the number of technology teachers recruited and a significant shortfall in the number of modern foreign language graduates recruited. You, Mr. Speaker, will be sad to learn that this year only one graduate has been recruited to teach Italian. It may be ciao for those who wish to learn Italian, but it is nil desperandum for others.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): That is Latin.

Mr. Clappison: I congratulate the Under-Secretary. She spotted that well. The reason why it is Latin is because two of the few subjects in which the Government are succeeding in recruiting sufficient teachers and are meeting their targets, and in which the numbers are increasing each year, are classical studies and history.

Mr. Hayes: Modernisation.

Mr. Clappison: My hon. Friend beats me to it. It may not be what the Government have in mind when they talk about modernising the teaching profession, and we doubt very much whether it will feature in the list of the Prime Minister's achievements in his speech to the Labour party conference, not least because he seems to show every bit as much of a wish to abolish history as to abolish verbs in his speeches.

The Government's policies have failed. Instead of the Government attracting the high-quality graduates that our schools need, the additional pressures that they have created for teachers have deterred them.

The Secretary of State spoke of lower class sizes under the Government as being an incentive for people to enter the teaching profession and an achievement, but in secondary schools, where the crisis is at its worst and it is proving the most difficult to attract graduates into teaching, class sizes have risen every year under the Government until there are now 36 per cent.—90,000—more pupils in secondary schools in classes of more than 30 than there were in 1997.

We have heard from Conservative Members just how much the Government have undermined the authority of teachers by preventing them from excluding children when it is necessary to do so. When my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) mentioned the case of the lady head teacher in Wales, the Secretary of State intervened to say that that was a matter relating to Wales and could not be commented on. However, that did not prevent the Minister for School Standards from commenting on it because she said that she was pleased for Mrs. Evans, and that it was a sensible decision. She was able to comment on that and our comment is that the Government have put far too many teachers' heads on the block and have undermined discipline and authority in schools.

The worst feature of all this is the ever-increasing burden of bureaucracy placed upon teachers by the Government. We hope that at long last the Government will take some positive steps to reduce that burden, other than by using their pathetic tool-cutting kit. However, we do not hold our breath because, since the beginning of this year alone, when the Government announced their intention to reduce bureaucracy, they have issued 142 new circulars to be read by teachers and heads.

The Prime Minister's proudest boast is that this year we have seen the best ever primary school test results. We applaud the success and achievement of pupils and teachers. However, both the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister failed to mention that those tests have shown an improvement each year since they were published under the previous Government. The Secretary of State will recall that he opposed the publication of those results. When the first set of results was published in 1995, showing a higher increase than for the present year, I think that the Secretary of State called it a searing indictment of the Tory Government—so much for the realism of his comments. Now it is an achievement under this Government. Likewise, the number of pupils obtaining five good GCSEs has increased every year since that examination began in 1988.

Yet today we have touched upon the greatest single threat to standards in our schools. The hopes of present and future generations are surely put at risk by the prospect of there simply being not enough teachers to teach them. Parents who find their children being taught by a succession of supply teachers—I agree with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, who quoted one case of 13 supply teachers—or parents who find their children being taught by someone who is not trained to teach the subject in question, or worst of all, as in Corby and Slough, who find their children being sent home because there is no one at all to teach them, are entitled to feel angry.

Those consequences flow inevitably from the Government's complacent attitude. We have heard no constructive response from the Government after the failure of their policies. All we have heard, as ever with this Government, is spin and propaganda. The anger of parents, teachers and heads will be all the greater when they confront the miserable consequences of the Government's failure to provide enough teachers in the future. When that happens, the Government's soundbite, "Education, education, education", will sound more than just a little hollow.

9.45 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): First, Mr. Speaker, may I congratulate you on your election to the Chair? I also congratulate the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) on his appointment to the Front Bench. He made an intervention on his first appearance on the Front Bench, and I hope that he stays there for a long time.

This has been an important debate. With the exception of the opening and closing speeches from the Opposition, most of the Opposition speeches were sensitive and made a genuine contribution to a crucial issue. I acknowledge the sensitivity of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins), who has real feeling for the schools in his constituency and made a thoughtful contribution. Without wishing to sound patronising, may I say that the speech of the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) was one of the best that I have heard him make? Again, it was thoughtful, and I particularly applaud his idea for coping with the shortage of maths teachers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) has been a valiant advocate of schools in his area and has some personal responsibility for the success of the education action zone. In return for what he has done for the school that is in difficulty in his constituency, of course I pledge all the support that we can give and all the support that that school will need until it is back on track and all the children are back in full-time education.

There is widespread agreement that without good teachers, standards will not improve. Good teachers are the key. We have many excellent teachers, and many of them achieve against the odds. Their performance over recent years has been the best of any generation of teachers that have gone before them. I do not agree with the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) that the quality of education has gone down. The quality of teaching has gone up, and that is reflected in improved examination results.

Yes, teaching is demanding. We ask more of our teachers than we ever asked of any previous generation of teachers. We must do that because education is more important now than in any previous generation. Teachers meet that demand. They are the generation of teachers who have produced the most literate and numerate group of 11-year-olds, who have got the best GCSE and A-level results, and who teach the broadest curriculum.

Yes, we need more teachers, and yes, there is a problem. Nobody seeks to hide from that. We do need more teachers. Strangely enough, we need more teachers at the very time that we have more teachers in post than we have had for a decade. We have 10,000 more teachers in post than we had two years ago.

We need more teachers because times are changing and expectations are changing. We need more because we want class sizes to be smaller. The hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) has had 123 extra teachers over the past three years to meet the primary school pledge in the local education authority where his constituency lies. We need more teachers because more parents want early years education and because more pupils are staying on at school.

The task has always been tough. It has never been easy to get as many teachers as we want into the school system. Compare what we have to do in our sector with what the private sector and other public sector employers have to do. We must attract 19,000 or 20,000 graduates each year into teaching if we are to meet the targets. PricewaterhouseCoopers, one of the biggest of the private sector graduate recruiters, needs 1,300 graduates, KPMG needs 600, BT needs 500 and IBM needs 400. That is the enormity of the task. To reach the target for maths trainees next year, we must recruit 70 per cent. of those who leave university with a maths degree. That shows the difficulty that we face. No hon. Member should come to the House and pretend that glib statements about cutting paperwork will solve the problem. There is a long way to go, and we have made a start.

Conservative Members speak as though they discovered only recently that there was a crisis—[HON. MEMBERS: "There is no crisis."] Conservative Members believed that there was a crisis and that they had discovered it. If there was a crisis, it happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Let us consider the figures. In 1989, vacancies were 1.5 per cent.; the figure is now half that. A decade ago, vacancies in London were 3.7 per cent.; the figure is now less than half that. Fewer than 22,000 people were recruited for initial teacher training in 1989; the current figure is higher than 28,000. In 1989, 450 pupils on any one day were sent home from schools in Tower Hamlets because there were not enough teachers to staff the classrooms.

The key point is not whether we have always found it difficult to recruit teachers, but what successive Governments have done about it. The dividing line is there. The Conservative party did nothing during the long years of difficulty in recruiting teachers. They relied on waiting for an economic bust. Boom and bust in the economic cycle meant bust and boom in teacher recruitment. They mirrored each other. The Conservative party's best performance on recruitment was in 1992, when the economy was in deep decline. That cannot be right; it is a one-club approach to teacher recruitment. It involves no incentives, no investment, no extra money for training and no valuing of those who teach shortage subjects. Conservative Members displayed no anxiety about red tape and bureaucracy then. Their policy was, "Hang on a minute, just wait, we're a Tory Government and there's bound to be economic decline around the corner. Recruitment will then increase."

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): As one who was there, I wonder whether the Minister is suffering from selective amnesia. Twice she has said that the Conservative Government took no action to deal with teacher shortages. Does not she recall the scarce-subject bursaries, which, to some extent, were material in solving the problems in the specific subjects for which they were tailored? Has she forgotten them?

Ms Morris: I remember them, but they were not material in solving the problems. Where are they now? I tried to find out about the bursaries. *[Interruption.]* I tell hon. Members, they were not available for students who went into initial teacher training in 1997; like every other scheme, they faded with the previous Government's cutbacks.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister is holding a conversation. She should not do that.

Ms Morris: If that is the only suggestion that the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) can make about the way in which the previous Government dealt with the teacher crisis—as it was in their day—it is no wonder that we inherited a teacher recruitment problem, just as we inherited other problems such as crumbling schools, and literacy and numeracy levels. Just as we have acted on literacy and numeracy and standards have improved; just as we have acted on crumbling schools, which are being repaired, so we have acted on teacher recruitment.

Over three years, almost £200 million has been invested in teacher recruitment. There were no golden hellos under the previous Government, and there was no training salary. Tonight's debate has shown that there would be no training salary if the Tories ever returned to government. The Conservative Government provided no incentive for returners to the profession, no well-funded employment route into teaching, and no training for those who wanted to teach but did not have the subject qualification. They had a one-club approach: wait for the recession and teacher recruitment will improve. Teaching

[Ms Morris]

is more important than that. It is one of the most vital professions in the country. We cannot expect recruitment in teaching to improve only when the economic cycle is in decline.

The measures that we have put in place over the past three years are beginning to bear fruit. Since 1998, applications to secondary postgraduate courses have increased by 14 per cent. That is more than 2,500 extra graduates. There are an extra 500 for maths and an extra 850 for science. Since the beginning of training salaries at the start of April, applications for maths and science have increased. Applications for technology have increased by 23 per cent. and those for modern foreign languages by 20 per cent. Applications for secondary places, where traditionally there has been difficulty in recruitment, have increased by 45 per cent. compared with the same period last year.

For the first time, the Government have broken the link between recruitment and the economic cycle. We are the first Government who have managed to recruit more people, to have increased applications, to have increased acceptances and to have increased staff in the shortage subjects without attaching these achievements to an economic slump. That is the key point, and it is the great achievement of the past three years.

Mr. Clappison: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Morris: I will, if the intervention is very short.

Mr. Clappison: The right hon. Lady's case is that the problems were all at the end of the previous Government's term of office and that her policies have turned things round. Was graduate recruitment to secondary education higher or lower in 1997 than it is now?

Ms Morris: In 1989, it was low. In 1992–93 it increased. There was then a gradual decline. The hon. Gentleman has picked 1997, but recruitment was in decline from 1993 onwards. There was then economic recession and high teacher recruitment. Never once after 1997 did teacher recruitment increase. The first time that it increased after 1997 was last year, after the Government had taken a range of measures to improve teacher recruitment.

I agree with many Members that the issue is not only about money going into teacher recruitment. It is also about money for teacher retention and about all the other things that make the job worth doing. It is about making sure that teachers have places where children who do not behave and ruin other children's life chances of learning can be sent so as to free them to get on with teaching the rest of the school. It is about smaller classes. To take up the remarks of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), it is also about classroom assistants, which all primary schools have. Twenty thousand new classroom assistants are going into classes to help teachers and to make life easier for them. It is about the extra money that has gone to small schools so that they can employ staff to help them with their administration. It is also about creating an environment where teachers want to stay when they have completed their training and get into the classroom.

It is not only the Government who have responsibility for recruiting and ensuring that people stay in teaching. Every Member has a responsibility, as has every teacher who makes a recommendation to his or her sixth forms as to what to do thereafter. Every parent who talks to his or her child about worthwhile jobs in society also has a responsibility. My disappointment is that yet again, when the Tories have had a chance to bring the debate on education to the Floor of the Chamber, they have chosen to carp. Over the past three years they have used every chance available to them to knock the literacy strategy, to knock the numeracy strategy, to get rid of excellence in cities and to get rid of education action zones. Today, joining on all that, they wish to get rid of training salaries. It is about time that the hon. Member for Maidenhead took on her responsibility to support the profession and used her time in the House to talk about the achievements of teachers. She should take every opportunity to celebrate their success. It is an honourable profession, and one of the best. It is more exciting to go into the teaching profession today than it has ever been. We should all appeal to young and not-so-young people to join the 400,000 teachers in schools today who do an excellent job and who, over the years, will be joined by many more who will work with them to raise standards for students.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 143, Noes 353.

Division No. 313] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David

Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
McCrea, Rev William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric

Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and Mrs. Anne McGuire.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 306, Noes 176.

Division No. 314] **[10.14 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Elliman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(W'alsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*

Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCrea, Rev William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick

Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and
Mr. Peter Luff.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the successful new measures introduced by the Government to support teacher recruitment, including training salaries, incentives for shortage subjects and an expanded graduate teacher programme; welcomes the fact that there has been a significant increase in applications and acceptances for teacher training as a result; further welcomes the support given by the School Teachers Review Body for the Government's plans to better reward good teaching; notes that there are nearly 7,000 more teachers in post now than in 1998; further notes that primary and infant class sizes have fallen after rising annually under the previous administration; recognises that headteachers have got both the resources and the powers to deal effectively with discipline for the first time; and commends the work of the Government in addressing specific recruitment difficulties in London and the positive and pro-active approach of this administration towards recruiting and rewarding teachers more generally.

Flags

10.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): I beg to move,

That the draft Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, which were laid before this House on 23rd October, be approved.

Last week in Northern Ireland saw the introduction of the first Budget presented by a local—as it happens, a nationalist—Minister at any time in the past 30 years. This week has seen a further historic development in Northern Ireland. For the first time, a common "Programme for Government" has been issued, providing a united vision of the future—of a stable, prosperous and descent society—and concrete Government actions to help achieve that, the like of which has not been seen in Northern Ireland before.

The "Programme for Government", presented jointly by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, is unique not only because of its far-reaching implications for every citizen in Northern Ireland, whatever their tradition, but because it enjoys the combined support of every Minister representing every party in the Executive—Unionist, nationalist and republican, pro and anti-agreement.

I suggest that the whole House will wish to applaud that signal achievement by the Executive. It shows that the Good Friday agreement is working; that inclusive government is working; and that politics in Northern Ireland is working. Every week for which politics works, violence is left further behind. We are seeing the shadow of the gunman which has been cast over Northern Ireland for decades now at long last fading away. It is partly because I want that progress to be maintained that I am introducing the regulations today.

We have to put old sores and provocations behind us. We cannot be constantly distracted from the proper business of government. We must find ways of resolving difficult issues in a sensitive and a balanced way. One such issue is that of flying the Union flag in Northern Ireland. The reason why that is troubling in Northern Ireland and not in Scotland or Wales, for example, is obvious. Northern Ireland is uniquely torn between two rival aspirations—to remain part of the United Kingdom, and to become part of Ireland.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mandelson: I shall continue if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, and make a little more progress.

I readily acknowledge the legitimacy of both those aspirations in Northern Ireland. The whole point of the Good Friday agreement is that Unionists and nationalists can participate together in government in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland while remaining every inch a Unionist, a nationalist or, indeed, a republican, as they wish, as long as they do so embracing peaceful and democratic means. This is the foundation of the new political dispensation that is being created in Northern Ireland.

Central to that dispensation is the principle of consent. The will of the people in Northern Ireland will govern its constitutional status—not guns or bullying or intimidation, but the will of the people, freely expressed.

That is why the participants in the Good Friday agreement explicitly accept that

> the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland . . . is to maintain the Union and accordingly, that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom reflects and relies upon that wish.

The meaning of that is unambiguous. It is that while there are—legitimately—two traditions, two national aspirations and two cultural identities in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom, and where a national flag is flown, it therefore follows that that flag should be the flag of the United Kingdom.

It follows that the principle of consent which governs this process should receive more than lip service in Northern Ireland, as, too, must another cornerstone of the Good Friday agreement—the principle of equality: there must be just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both traditions.

There can be no second-class citizens in Northern Ireland, and there will not be. That is why we are doing what we are doing, reflecting parity of esteem between the traditions across the board in relation to the range of Government activity, the policing reforms, the criminal justice reforms and every other aspect of society in which identity becomes important. It is why, too, the regulations that I am introducing tonight have been drawn up in a sensitive way, and why, since May, I have consulted all the parties and offered every opportunity to the Executive and then to the Assembly to reach a consensus of their own on flag flying that would remove the need for me to make any regulations at all.

The Executive could not reach agreement—nor could the multi-party Assembly ad hoc committee which produced a report that was debated by the Assembly on 17 October. For this reason—and I regret it—it is not possible to draw up regulations which all the parties would welcome. However, the door remains open. If, in the coming weeks and months, the Executive is able to agree a way forward, I will happily revoke the regulations, with the approval of Parliament, to make way for a solution which enjoys the support of all parties. However, my firm judgment is that, in the absence of such a decision, to leave to individual Ministers the decision about when and how the Union flag will be flown, in some cases ignoring past custom, with practice differing from building to building, would be singularly unwise. That was the situation when devolution began and it simply brought needless and undesirable political strife, dividing the Executive and the parties at a time and in circumstances where their unity on other more important issues is very much needed.

That is why I am taking the initiative tonight, but I stress that it is a balanced one. The regulations are sensitive to the needs of each tradition and they are grounded in the letter and spirit of the Good Friday agreement.

The Union flag is not a party political or sectional symbol, representing one side of the community only. It may have become a political football for some who want to play politics, but for the overwhelming mass of people in Northern Ireland, it is not such a party political or sectional symbol. It will continue to fly over designated Government buildings in Northern Ireland on the same basis as it does throughout the United Kingdom, without extra days tacked on for Northern Ireland as happened previously.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): What is my right hon. Friend's view of the perception that the issue of the display of flags ought to be subject to periodic review—the argument of the Social Democratic and Labour party?

Mr. Mandelson: I have said that if the Executive and the Assembly can find agreement and come forward with their own solution to the issue, I will happily bow to that agreement and accept that solution. In those circumstances, I would happily revoke the regulations and invite the House to approve that. However, if I were to introduce what might be known as a sunset clause for the regulations—to have them operate for a year and then disappear, allowing the debate to be opened up and the argument to begin all over again—I would not be doing a service to the Executive and the progress of devolution in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): The Secretary of State has said that he is seeking to avoid ambiguity. Is he confirming that the flag will be flown on all those buildings where previously it was flown on specified days prior to devolution? If so, could he explain why there are seven specified headquarters buildings and no reference to the Stormont Parliament buildings, where the flag was traditionally flown prior to devolution?

Mr. Mandelson: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I would like to go through each of the regulations in turn. As I do so, it will become clear what I am proposing tonight for the House to approve. I will take up that issue as I go through them.

It is important for the House to note that I am not ordering any particular Minister of any particular party to raise the Union flag on any personal or particular flagpole. The designation does not reach to that sort of detail or specification. It applies to Government buildings—that is an important point—that contain, in the majority, civil servants working for the Government.

Regulation 2 requires that the Union flag is flown at the seven principal Government buildings listed in part I of the schedule on the days listed in part II of the schedule. The Union flag must also be flown on the specified days at any other Government building not listed in the schedule—this relates to the point made by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs)—where it was the practice to fly it on the specified days in the 12 months preceding 30 November 1999. That is a permissive regulation; it is not obligatory. I stress that it applies to Government buildings where it was the practice to fly the flag in that period that I have described.

The regulations do not apply to Parliament buildings, which was the other point raised by the hon. Member for East Antrim. The Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000 gives me power to make regulations only for Government buildings. Such buildings are defined in that order, which was made last May, as those buildings in Northern Ireland wholly or mainly occupied by the Northern Ireland civil service. I therefore do not have power to make regulations covering Parliament buildings.

[Mr. Mandelson]

In addition, I do not believe that it would be appropriate for me, as Secretary of State, to regulate the manner in which flags should be flown over the seat of the devolved Administration. Hitherto, there has been no complaint about the way in which this matter has been dealt with by the Assembly authorities. Consequently, and quite rightly, it will be for the Northern Ireland Assembly to decide what arrangements are to be made for its own building. I hope that the House will agree that that is an appropriate course for me to have taken.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Will my right hon. Friend clarify whether equivalent buildings in other parts of the United Kingdom fly the flag on the same days as those listed in the order?

Mr. Mandelson: Yes, there is consistency between the days designated for Northern Ireland and those designated for the rest of the United Kingdom. Those days are designated by the royal prerogative and promulgated through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Extra days used to apply to Northern Ireland that did not apply to the UK, such as new year's day, Easter Sunday, and 12 July. Those extra Northern Ireland days have been deleted from the designation, in order to create consistency between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Removing 12 July from the list seemed to be the sensitive course of action.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Will the Secretary of State touch on those other areas where it is possible that differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK might arise? In the rest of Great Britain, there will occasions on which the royal prerogative will be exercised to order that flags be flown at half mast, such as on the death of a foreign head of state. However, the regulations contain no such provision—nor any provision to cover special occasions that might fall outside what the order prescribes. How will the regulations deal with such matters—or will special regulations have to be made for any special events such as those I have set out?

Mr. Mandelson: I suppose that there must have been an occasion in the past when our national flag was lowered to honour the sovereign of another country. It would be open to me to introduce such a variation, but I think that people in Northern Ireland would expect the practice followed in other parts of the United Kingdom to be honoured in Northern Ireland.

I hope that the regulations will allow people to relax a little about the subject of flag flying, and take the unexpected developments that have been described more in their stride. Every hoisting of the Union flag would not then be a major constitutional issue about which people feel that they must take to the proverbial barricades to fight their respective positions.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Will the Secretary of State say who decides whether the Union flag is flown over this House? Would that decision be comparable to the decision in Stormont?

Mr. Mandelson: I am sure that hon. Members make that decision. If we do not, I am sure that Mr. Speaker is able to exercise his discretion on the matter. Failing that, I am sure that there is a Father of the House somewhere waiting to reintroduce his discretion in this matter, as in all others.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The Secretary of State may be unduly optimistic about taking all the heat out of the flags issue in Northern Ireland, but I hope that he is right. The right hon. Gentleman referred to Government buildings used by the Northern Ireland civil service. Can he confirm that the regulations have no effect on buildings used by the armed forces in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Mandelson: No, they have no effect on them whatever. Those are British bases and camps providing facilities for the British Army, and over those bases it is appropriate that the British flag should fly.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): The right hon. Gentleman has set out clearly how, on the 17 days in the year that the regulations specify, there is a requirement to fly the Union flag. Departments are under the control and authority of Ministers. What happens if a Minister instructs his officials not to fly the flag?

Mr. Mandelson: I hope very much that it would not even occur to a Minister in the devolved Administration to ask any civil servant to ignore Parliament's wishes or to disobey the law. I am not asking individual Ministers to take any decision or action in relation to the flying of the flag over buildings which they might occupy, along with other Ministers and other Departments in the same Administration. Just as I am not asking them to take any initiative or do anything, I hope that they, in turn, will not take any initiative or action to discourage others from complying with the law. Of course, in the unhappy eventuality of the matter needing to be tested in and enforced by the courts, that will have to be done.

Regulation 3 allows the Union flag to be flown at a Government building during a visit by a head of state other than Her Majesty the Queen. Regulation 4 requires that the royal standard is flown at a Government building during a visit by Her Majesty the Queen. As is the requirement in the rest of the United Kingdom, the royal standard is to be flown only while Her Majesty is in the building and must be flown in a superior position to the Union flag if it is also flown during the visit.

Regulation 6 requires that the Union flag is flown at half mast at the specified Government buildings following the death of a member of the royal family, or of a serving or former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Regulation 7 provides that, where the Union flag is required or permitted to be flown on the specified buildings on the specified days, it may also be flown at any other Government buildings on the same day and in the same manner.

Regulation 8 allows the European flag—I hope that this is not too provocative—to be flown alongside the Union flag on Europe day, at a Government building not specified in part 1 of the schedule. I am not seeking to be divisive or destabilising by making this suggestion. The regulation also allows the national flag of a visiting head of state to be flown alongside the Union flag on the occasion of a visit by a head of state other than Her Majesty, at a Government building other than that or those being visited.

Regulation 9 prohibits the flying of flags at Government buildings other than as provided for by the regulations. The Union flag will not, therefore, be flaunted unnecessarily.

Some nationalists have argued that the Good Friday agreement requires either the use of both the British and Irish flags or no flags at all. They argue that if they cannot have them both, they should have neither. I respect that view, but I really cannot accept it. It is worth recalling what the agreement says about the use of symbols for public purposes. All the participants acknowledged its sensitivity

and the need in particular in creating the new institutions to ensure that such symbols and emblems are used in a manner that promotes mutual respect rather than division.

That means not that there should be no symbols—that is not what the Good Friday agreement says or is about—but that their use should be managed with sensitivity and respect for both sides of the community.

Had I brought forward regulations today that required the flying of the Union flag at all times come what may, or on significantly more occasions than one finds in other parts of the United Kingdom, or if I was suggesting that it should be flown in the heart of strongly nationalist areas, I should indeed have been guilty of insensitivity to the minority tradition.

But I am not doing so, and I have to say, as I have said before—the point is worth repeating in the House—that there is no point, while addressing nationalist concerns, as we are quite rightly doing, in simply replacing an alienated nationalist tradition with an alienated Unionist one. Unionists' identity and their sense of Britishness needs to be respected in Northern Ireland as much as nationalists' identity. It is in order to achieve that that I am, among other things, bringing forward these regulations.

In conclusion, I believe that what Unionists want, and what these regulations achieve, is that the national flag should be flown over Government buildings in the same respectful, common-or-garden, low-key way as it is flown in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is the sensible approach and I welcome the mature recognition by the Ulster Unionist party, in its submission to the Assembly's ad hoc committee, that there is no need or desire to flaunt the Union flag as such.

What I am doing tonight is not—and should not be seen as—an insult to nationalists, because it is not intended as such. It is a neutral, matter-of-fact, reflection of the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, for which the agreement provides.

Our aim must be to reduce the controversy that attends the flying of the Union flag, not to stoke it. That is what these regulations should do when the heat subsides, and I hope that the House will support them on that basis.

10.52 pm

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): First, I strongly endorse what the Secretary of State said about the devolved Executive. I hope that it gave pleasure to everyone in the House to see that Executive working effectively and undertaking the difficult task of trying to balance its budget, by taking the tough decisions that have to be taken by politicians elsewhere—balancing difficult budget decisions in different Departments. I hope that the devolved Administration—by way of an Assembly and an Executive—will continue for a long time. I hope that there will not be people who signed up to the Belfast agreement but do not honour their obligations, thereby putting the Executive under pressure. However, that is a debate for another day.

Secondly, I thank the Secretary of State for his courtesy in giving me a little advance notice of the order. That was much appreciated.

May I take you back, Mr. Speaker, to a debate on this very subject that we held earlier in the Session? I remind you that I clearly said that my party believes that Northern Ireland should be treated in exactly the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom when it comes to flags. I am broadly happy that the orders that the Secretary of State is laying before the House take into account a natural consistency. Therefore I welcome them. If, by any chance, there is a Division on them tonight, those of my colleagues who are present will support the Government.

It is wrong that the issue of flags should become irrational. I very much endorse the Secretary of State's point that people should be more relaxed and flexible about flags. Flags should be used to celebrate or, at a time of bereavement, to express sadness—as happens elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

My reading of the order—unless I have misunderstood it—is that Northern Ireland is brought entirely into line with England, Scotland and Wales, with the obvious exception that St. Patrick's day is recognised, as the other saints' days are recognised in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Having said all that, let me pose a few questions, which I hope might be answered if the Secretary of State or the Under-Secretary catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to wind up the debate.

I listened carefully to what the Secretary of State said in response to the very legitimate question asked by the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) about sanctions if the flags were not flown. I, like the right hon. Gentleman, would deeply regret that and hope that it would never happen, but I was pleased to note that he would be prepared to take action in the courts if need be. I hope that that is not necessary, but it is important that that is seen as part of this debate, and that must be right.

On an even more technical note, the Secretary of State has listed some Government buildings where the flag will be flown on appropriate days. I should like an undertaking that that list will be kept under constant review, because obviously Ministries will be moved and other key buildings will be transferred from time to time, and his list will become irrelevant and dated. That is very important.

I thought that the intervention by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) was also very relevant, because I think that we are proud that on appropriate dates the flag flies from this Palace of Westminster, and it seems to me appropriate that it should fly from Stormont as well. Under the definition, of course, Stormont is not a Government building, because I think that the definition of a Government building is simply that the majority of people working there are Government employees, whereas the majority of people in the Parliament obviously work for the Parliament rather than the Government.

I understand the Secretary of State's reticence. We have a devolved Administration, and he does not want to interfere unduly. However, I hope that a message is sent

[Mr. Andrew MacKay]

from this debate to our friends and colleagues in the devolved Assembly and the Executive, that it would be appropriate—as happens, I believe, in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly—that the flags are flown on appropriate days.

My final point, and final quibble—I admit that these are merely quibbles on detail—concerns the issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) raised, about when flags are flown at half mast on occasions other than the passing away of members of the royal family and serving and past Prime Ministers.

In the past couple of weeks, we witnessed the tragedy of the premature death of Donald Dewar. We noted that, rightly, flags were flown at half mast both at the Scottish Parliament and, I think, in Government buildings here in London. That was absolutely right and proper. Heaven forbid that our present First Minister, or future First Ministers, should pass away in office in Northern Ireland, but if that should be the case it would be absolutely appropriate if the same happened, and I think that it would be appreciated if somehow, as a result of this debate, it was recognised that that should happen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield raised a point about the death of heads of state in office. Let us be mildly controversial and suppose—again, heaven forbid—that the President of the Irish Republic were to pass away. I think that if that happened, it would be hugely inappropriate if flags were not flown at half mast. It would not be understood in Dublin and, frankly, it would not be understood by the overwhelming majority of my constituents and the overwhelming majority of people in both communities in Northern Ireland. I hope that, in the relaxed manner that the Secretary of State wants flags to be flown, people will recognise that flags should be flown when the head of state of a friendly neighbour or a friendly partner in the European Union, or in NATO or elsewhere, passes away.

That is the non-controversial part, but of course I am always very cautious when looking at any order that the Secretary of State brings forward. He would expect nothing less.

As the Secretary of State surmised, I was slightly worried about his explanatory note, which said:

> The European flag must be flown in addition to the Union flag on Europe day.

Mr. Mandelson: May be.

Mr. MacKay: No. It is "must be", I am afraid—I am quoting from the right hon. Gentleman's note—in the case of the seven Government buildings; but the European flag "may" be flown from the remaining Government buildings. Being a conspiracy theorist, I was naturally convinced that our openly Europhile Secretary of State was defying the Chancellor and the hon. Member for Coventry, North–West (Mr. Robinson), and was pushing his European case further. I regret to report that I was wrong, and that that is the practice throughout the United Kingdom, so the order complies with my consistent desire that Northern Ireland should be treated absolutely the same as the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Secretary of State rightly paraphrased the provisions of the order, because it would have taken rather a long time to go through everything. However, there is a happy ending, because the explanatory note in full states:

> The European flag must be flown in addition to the Union flag on Europe day at any of those buildings which have more than one flagpole.

My advice to those who are concerned about the issue is to make sure that they have only one flagpole.

On that more light-hearted note, may I again say to the Secretary of State that we strongly support the order. We think that it makes common sense. I hope that it will take some of the sting out of the issue of flags and emblems. I also commend the order to the House.

11 pm

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): It has been said that in the sweep of history, this is not a great issue, and I am sure that that is so. Equally, it is not a minor matter. Despite the relaxed, calm and understated way in which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made his case for the order, it is a serious matter that will cause considerable problems and for which there is a hidden agenda.

A headline in *The Guardian* today states:

> Sinn Fein will be told to fly the flag.

The report continues:

> Sinn Fein ministers in Northern Ireland are to be forced to fly the union flag.

An article in *The Daily Telegraph* today states:

> Peter Mandelson prompted the fury of Sinn Fein last night by ordering the Union flag to be flown.

I shall return to that particular spin shortly, because I do not think that it was addressed to Members of this House or to Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, but to another meeting that will take place in Belfast on Saturday. I will refer to that later.

I wish to deal with some of the points that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made. His statement said that we were treating Northern Ireland the same as the rest of the United Kingdom, but the first point to be made is that Northern Ireland is not the same as the rest of the United Kingdom. Otherwise this order would not exist. As I understand it, there is not a flags and emblems order before the Scottish Assembly, and even if it had the power to legislate on such matters, I do not imagine that there would be one before the Welsh Assembly. I also understand that the saltire, the symbol of the Scottish nation, is flown over Government buildings in Scotland and the dragon of Wales is flown over Government buildings in Wales. That immediately raises the question as to why the Irish tricolour, the symbol of the Irish nation, is not flown to represent those members of the Irish nation in Northern Ireland who would like to see it flown over their Government buildings.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNamara: I will not give way, because there is very little time, and if I did, it might stir up other Members who might want to make observations later.

My right hon. Friend sought to pray in aid the principle of consent, but consent suggests that the parties agree. As far as I understand it, the only parties that agree to the proposal are the Administration and various types of

Ulster Unionist, not the nationalist groups in Northern Ireland. They do not consent to the proposal. My right hon. Friend quoted the Good Friday agreement, which states:

> All participants acknowledge the sensitivity of the use of symbols and emblems for public purposes, and the need in particular in creating the new institutions to ensure that such symbols and emblems are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division.

What could do more to create division than the main symbol of one faction in Northern Ireland—albeit, at the moment, the majority faction—being flown over Government buildings on particular dates, when the flag of the other faction is not to be flown?

Mr. Wilshire: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNamara: No, I will not. I have already said that I want to finish my points so that others can make theirs.

Paragraph 5 of the Good Friday agreement does not back up what my right hon. Friend has said. My right hon. Friend said that he discussed matters with the parties, the Assembly, the Executive and the ad hoc committee, but he did not discuss the matter with a number of organisations that might have been able to give him some other advice, such as the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission, which, under the legislation emanating from the Good Friday agreement, are specifically designed to deal with those particular matters. They were not consulted. I do not believe that the Civic Forum was consulted, and I have no idea whether the Irish Government were consulted, but it would be nice to know. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will be able to say when he replies.

My right hon. Friend also made a great point about his role as the sovereign power, and spoke of the need, as a member of the sovereign power, to act impartially. Under the section which deals with constitutional issues, the Good Friday agreement says:

> the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction there shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities.

The regulations meet those criteria with regard to only one community. They do not make the point, nor do they accept—I come back to this point again—that the buildings are Government buildings of the devolved Assembly, representing both communities in Northern Ireland. If the Union flag should fly, the tricolour should also fly. If the tricolour does not fly, neither should the Union flag.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNamara: I did not give way to the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire), whom I regard as a friend, as I do the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik), so I shall not give way to him, either.

I come now to the spin on this matter. Why have the regulations been introduced with such enormous speed at this particular time? The answer is because the Unionist council is meeting next week, and this is another bone to be thrown to the Unionists to try to support the position of the First Minister. *[Interruption.]* The dogs are barking. My right hon. Friend is often quoted as saying that he regards the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) as indispensable. One of the things that many older politicians on all sides have said to all of us at one time or another is that the cemeteries are full of indispensable people. Therefore, we should be looking carefully at the policy that is being followed.

The First Minister is fighting hard to maintain the Good Friday agreement, to try to keep it going, to try to keep the Assembly going and to try to keep the Executive going. But for how long does one continue to make concessions on such matters, keeping the First Minister in place but unstitching the agreement?

Before the summer recess, when we were discussing the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill, which arose from the Patten report, my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Minister of State tabled an amendment on the nature of the work of the RUC and persuaded Labour Members to support it, in some cases even against their better judgment. Before we had debated that, we suddenly had an announcement from the Minister of State that the amendment was to be withdrawn. That was done to bolster the right hon. Member for Upper Bann, the leader of the Unionist party.

We can go on and on doing that. As a Unionist poet said, as long as we are paying the danegeld, we will never get rid of the Dane. If we continue to behave in that way, we will not strengthen the First Minister; we will undermine his position more and more. My advice to the Unionist council is to keep him there and to keep him under pressure, because Unionists will get concessions until the Government realise that by making those concessions, they are losing the other part of the community. I do not believe that they want to do that, any more than they want to lose the Unionist part of the community.

I shall not divide the House on the order tonight. What other colleagues do is up to them. The order is very much on the slippery slope. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) used to speak of "saving private Trimble", and that is what is happening again tonight.

11.11 pm

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): It is always amusing to listen to the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). Lest the Secretary of State leave the House with the impression that all is rosy in the garden in Northern Ireland, may I bring a dose of reality to the debate before I deal with the specifics of the order?

Although we have devolution and we welcome the opportunity for locally elected representatives to have a greater say in the government of Northern Ireland, there are major fundamental problems with the process that must be addressed. Those problems include the failure of the terrorist organisations to deliver the peace that the people of Northern Ireland desire, and the failure of those organisations to decommission their illegal weapons two and a half years after the Belfast agreement.

The hon. Member for Hull, North spoke of concessions, but if he took time to weigh up the concessions made on both sides, he might conclude that the concessions made

[Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson]

to the republican movement significantly outweigh any concessions made to Unionists. There can be no greater concession that a society can make than to release on to the streets the murderers who are guilty of some of the most heinous crimes.

If the hon. Gentleman reflects on what he regards as a concession in the form of the order, and sets that alongside the fact that the IRA has had all its prisoners released from prison, he will conclude that the balance is, indeed, unbalanced. In respect of the process of which the order is, I suppose, a part, there are problems that need to be addressed. I hope that the Government will use the same haste as that with which they introduced the order to tackle those problems, especially the violence that continues in Northern Ireland.

With reference to the order, an argument has been advanced by the nationalist parties—the Social Democratic and Labour party and Sinn Fein—and indeed by the hon. Member for Hull, North that in addition to the flying of the Union flag, the tricolour should also be flown on the specified Government buildings. However, Northern Ireland is not part of the Irish Republic; it has no constitutional link with the Irish Republic. Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom. The full title of our nation is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. If the hon. Member for Hull, North checks his passport, he will discover that that is the case.

The Irish tricolour, as the flag of a foreign nation, has no place on the Government buildings of part of the United Kingdom. Only the Union flag, which is the flag of our nation, should be flown as a specified flag.

Mr. Wilshire: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that flying the flag of a sovereign foreign nation over part of the United Kingdom would be offensive not only to the people of Northern Ireland, but to the people of England, Wales and Scotland? We would find it a monstrous outrage if a foreign flag were flown over part of our country.

Mr. Donaldson: The hon. Gentleman's comments speak for themselves.

The hon. Member for Hull, North referred to the practice in Scotland and Wales. However, they are integral parts of the United Kingdom. In Scotland, the saltire flies alongside the Union flag on the Parliament buildings because the saltire is the flag of Scotland. The tricolour is not the flag of Northern Ireland. If the hon. Member for Hull, North wishes a flag that represents Northern Ireland to fly alongside the Union flag, we have our own flag. If he wants to pursue that matter, I am happy to support him. However, I do not support flying the Irish tricolour on an equal basis with the Union flag. There is no joint authority in Northern Ireland, and the Irish tricolour should not be flown.

The Secretary of State said that there had been no complaint about the failure to fly the Union flag on Parliament Buildings. That is not correct. If he reads the submissions by the parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly on the regulations, he will realise that four parties—the Ulster Unionist party, the Progressive Unionist party and the United Unionist Assembly party—called for them to be extended to include Parliament buildings, Stormont. It is therefore not correct to say that the issue is not a matter of concern to parties in Northern Ireland.

Future Government buildings constitute another matter of concern. Let us suppose that one of the Departments relocates to a new building. Will the Secretary of State have to introduce a new order to specify that building for the flying of the Union flag? The matter cannot be covered retrospectively, and I hope that the Secretary of State will address the issue.

I support the comments of the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) on sanctions. Without effective sanctions, the regulations are toothless. The problem that gave rise to them was the failure of Sinn Fein-IRA Ministers to fly the Union flag. There would be no regulations and no debate if that were not the case. Yet the regulations do not provide for sanctions against Ministers who fail to comply with the requirement to fly the Union flag on their departmental buildings.

Mr. Peter Robinson: As well as not complying with the requirement, Ministers might also breach regulation 9 and have the Irish tricolour flown alongside the Union flag. Ministers can direct officials. Again, there are no sanctions against that.

Mr. Donaldson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Secretary of State says that he cannot conceive of circumstances in which a Minister would compel a civil servant to disobey the regulations. He does not understand the nature of the Minister of Education. If he reads the record of the Minister of Education in the Northern Ireland Assembly, he may take a rather different view. The organisation to which that Minister is connected has not been reluctant in the past to bring pressure to bear on civil servants, and the Secretary of State knows that.

The regulations cover only what are described as "government buildings". There are many other public buildings in Northern Ireland where there is controversy about the flying of the flag. We shall have to examine this issue in more detail in future. It is the Secretary of State's desire that the regulations will settle the flags issue, but that is to underestimate the problem. I think it will continue to be a problem. There may be a need in future to make regulations governing the flying of the Union flag on other public buildings, sad though that is. I wish that that were not the case. It is sad that we have to pass legislation—for Northern Ireland especially—to regulate the flying of our national flag. The flag should be flown without the need for regulations.

There is a lack of maturity, sadly, on the part of some who fail to recognise the legitimacy of Northern Ireland's constitutional position. That has brought us to the point where regulation is necessary. We welcome the closing of some of the loopholes by the regulations, but considerable problems remain. I hope that the Secretary of State will take them on board.

11.22 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): I agree with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that time has moved on from the scenario set out by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson). The Belfast agreement was the foundation of a new political

dispensation. I agree with my right hon. Friend that we need to put old sores and provocations behind us. We need to consider things in a sensitive and balanced way.

At the same time, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). It is clear from the Belfast agreement that on constitutional issues it demands parity of esteem. It is not acceptable for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to describe the Union flag as not being seen as sectional to certain members of the community in Northern Ireland. It is clear that it is seen as such and as representative of only one tradition.

Unfortunately, the regulations are something of a cop-out. They are clearly a sop before the Unionist council this weekend. They are an almost trivial sop. If the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) is to be deselected, I do not believe that regulations of this sort will save him at this stage. As we go down this slippery slope of agreement and sop after sop, at some stage we should return to the principles of the Belfast agreement, which was based on parity of esteem.

The regulations will lead to almost ludicrous manipulations of legislation. The detail of the regulations is as follows:

> The Union flag shall be flown at . . . government buildings.

We are demanding that the Union flag shall be able to fly over the departments of nationalist Ministers on St. Patrick's day. It is almost farcical.

Regulation 4 provides that where there are two flagpoles, one for the Union flag and the other for the European flag. What if there are three flagpoles? If my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) were speaking, he would be taking the regulations to pieces with his wit. We can fly the tricolour only if the Taoiseach is visiting. Does that require a daily visit from the Taoiseach? It seems that one flag must not be flown above the other. Will an official be measuring flagpoles to ascertain at which height the flag will be flown?

Sanctions are important. Will there be sanctions against anyone flying the tricolour on a Government building? Are we returning to the days of making it illegal to fly the tricolour on certain buildings? Will there be a criminal sanction against a Minister, a disciplinary sanction or a civil action? An unnecessary debate is having to take place because we are not abiding by the principles of the Belfast agreement. It is clear to me that if we extrapolate from the Belfast agreement the principle of parity of esteem, we should treat symbols equally. Therefore, if flags are to be flown, there should be the two flags of both traditions or neither.

11.24 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): We get more good news than bad from the Province these days, and the IRA's statement today is circumstantially encouraging. *[Interruption.]* I have always been an optimist, and I reserve the right to say at some point, "I told you so."

It is worth bearing in mind the fact that, while we talk about flags, Northern Irish politicians in Stormont are talking about the health service, social services and education. To use the phrase of the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson), while we talk about process, in Northern Ireland they talk about government, and that is a healthy step forward.

The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) rightly said that the Government seem to be trying to balance the concerns of the two main communities in Northern Ireland. That is the right approach. It is sensible to support the order, because it returns us to the situation pre-devolution. We must recognise the work done by the flags committee in the Assembly, but it is unfortunate that it was unable to reach an agreement on the issue. Naturally enough it has required the Secretary of State to make a ruling. The order is well balanced and it should be viewed as the best way forward, although by no means the last word. The last word would be for us not to be discussing this matter.

There is a need to promote shared symbols in the Province rather than symbols that perpetuate division. The Union flag is being used as symbol of a division, and that is slightly to miss the point of this regulation. The Secretary of State was right to say that it tries to show genuine sensitivity towards both sides.

It will come as no surprise to the House to hear that the Liberal Democrats welcome the provision for the European flag to be flown alongside the Union flag on Europe day, because it is a symbol that unites us all. *[Interruption.]* I simply muse that it unites us all, although certain groups are united against Europe. I hope that the hon. Member who winds up for the official Opposition will clarify whether it is their policy to oppose the flying of the European flag in principle for the entire term of the next Parliament but not after that.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): For ever.

Mr. Öpik: Thank you, for those who understood the point.

On a more serious note, as I listened to the hon. Member for Hull, North talking about the tricolour in the same breath as he talked about the flags used in Wales, Scotland and England, it struck me as more appropriate in that context to refer to St. Patrick's flag, which is a more like-for-like comparison of identity for the Province within the United Kingdom. I am very sensitive to the point that he made about the tricolour itself.

We must recognise that the Good Friday agreement referred to Northern Ireland as a continuing entity within the United Kingdom and not as an entity within the south of Ireland or as part of the island of Ireland. We need to be careful about how we assess the use of the tricolour.

As the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) implied, it would be possible to fly the tricolour in perpetuity if the Taoiseach chose to have his residence in Belfast. I suspect that he will not make that sacrifice.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Öpik: I may be proved wrong.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I am amazed at the ignorance in this place. The Taoiseach is not the head of state, but that may be another revolutionary move planned for Dublin.

Mr. Öpik: I stand corrected, but I stand by the points that I made in principle, at least for the term of the next Parliament.

The problem is that the Government are attempting to prescribe an attitude. The comment of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) about whether, under the

[Mr. Öpik]

regulation, we can honour the death of foreign heads of state by flying the Union flag at half mast shows that there will still be loopholes that could be used by those who are determined to make it difficult for the order to work. In essence we are codifying an etiquette which, although it applies to the whole United Kingdom, we have been forced to put in black and white for Northern Ireland.

I am a realist. I think that while symbolically the proposal should encourage Unionist Members sitting behind me, it should not be seen as the final word on the matter. I shall return to that at the end of my speech.

The hon. Member for Hull, North speculated that this might be a sop to the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble). Perhaps that is true to an extent, but the Taoiseach himself, Bertie Ahern, has said that he regards the right hon. Gentleman as a pivotal character in the development of the peace process. I know that the hon. Member for Hull, North agrees; I do not question that. I simply say that sometimes friends of the process need a helping hand. I do not think that there will be any real losers from the regulations. There will simply be a respectful and sensitive recognition of something that I also interpret the Good Friday agreement to mean—the rightful identity of Northern Ireland, for the time being at least, in the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley takes a rather hard line. I hope he does not mind my saying that, but it may surprise some Members. The term "hard line" is, of course, relative. I regard the hon. Gentleman as a friend and reserve the right to go on bending his ear in the Tea Room and elsewhere, but I hope that he will consider taking a slightly softer line at the weekend—although that is obviously a matter for him. I think that the regulations may tackle some issues that I have heard him raise in the past. Let me suggest, if I may be so bold, that they represent something of a middle way in the flags debate. [HON. MEMBERS: "A third way!"] Or a third way. To that extent, they suggest the possibility of a certain empathy between the two sides in the debate.

The Secretary of State confirmed that he would revoke, or seek to revoke, the regulations if a consensual solution were found in Northern Ireland. I consider that to be a sensible and encouraging step, because it leaves the way open for Northern Ireland to resolve the flags issue, even if it has not done so yet. However, it also underlines the cold fact that, although the regulations attempt to cure the symptoms, they cannot cure the cause because the cause is an attitude. However much we debate these matters in the Chamber, it seems to be a cold, hard but very real fact that, ultimately, if we want to resolve the issues that underlie this evening's debate, it is up to the politicians of Northern Ireland because only they can cure the cause.

11.32 pm

Rev. William McCrea (South Antrim): It is an honour for me to return to the House of Commons as Member of Parliament for South Antrim. However, the circumstances that brought about the by-election cause pain in the hearts of many right hon. and hon. Members.

The late Clifford Forsythe had represented South Antrim since 1983. He entered the House when I first entered it myself. During my fourteen and a half years here previously as Member of Parliament for Mid-Ulster, Clifford was a personal friend. We shared many cherished principles in our hearts.

During the election campaign, I was deeply moved by how often, on the doorsteps, Clifford was mentioned with great love and deep affection, and by the respect in which he was held both in and outside the South Antrim constituency. That is further eloquent testimony to his integrity as a Member of Parliament. Tonight, I salute his memory, and place on record my genuine respect and affection for him. I trust that my efforts to defend traditional Unionist values will ensure that his battle for the cause of democracy lives on. I again record my sympathy for his beloved widow and family circle, and assure them of my Christian prayers and love.

South Antrim is the heart of traditional Unionism, and my election has sent a clear, unambiguous message to those in Government—the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and those in authority. I promise my constituents that I shall endeavour to represent them faithfully in the mother of Parliaments. Irrespective of their background, I will give them support and assistance with their everyday problems.

I have listened to the debate with interest. There are not many things on which the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) and I agree. He has a very different perspective from me. However, I agree with one aspect of his speech. I do not think that the Secretary of State can expect the people of Northern Ireland to be gullible. The timing of the debate has more to do with the future of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) than with anything else.

The London and Dublin Governments are running around like headless chickens seeking to find ways and means to bolster a situation and an agreement that the majority of Unionists firmly believe is fundamentally flawed and therefore reject. There is no misunderstanding the meaning of the result of my election to the House. I have no doubt that the IRA statement, the alleged proposed visit of the Prime Minister to Belfast and a few announcements attempting to create the illusion of progress will aim to buy off the Unionist electorate. It should be remembered—once bitten, twice shy.

The proposals in relation to the flying of the Union flag, the national flag of Northern Ireland, are wrong both in principle and in practice. They are born out of constitutional ambiguity, which arose out of the signing of the Belfast agreement. Regardless of the view that the right hon. Member for Upper Bann and those who support him propagate, the failure of the Union flag to fly over Government buildings is a clear indication of the many issues that the Belfast agreement left unresolved. If the agreement had truly secured the Union and brought acceptance on behalf of the nationalist population about the status of Northern Ireland, there would be no need for the legislation and for the debate.

It is interesting. We have heard from the hon. Member for Hull, North about the anger and frustration in the nationalist-republican community about the flying of flags. Where are the two Members for republican Sinn Fein-IRA who have been elected to the House? I do not see them. Where are the Social Democratic and Labour Members who feel passionately about the flags issue? I do not see any of them. However, I believe, deep in my heart, that they thought that the issue and the cause would be duly represented by the hon. Member for Hull, North and possibly by the Secretary of State.

Unfortunately, constitutional certainty does not exist. Even more regrettably for the Unionist population in Northern Ireland, the so-called cure to the problem of the refusal of Sinn Fein-IRA Ministers to fly the flag may be worse than the problem. If we clear away the spin by the Secretary of State and leader of the Ulster Unionist party, some fundamental problems remain with the legislation.

It is interesting that, despite the recommendations and report of the Northern Ireland Assembly, no significant change was made to the draft order. It is yet another exercise in spin without substance. The Secretary of State did not find it necessary to make any significant amendment to the legislation—neither to change the political balance of the order, nor to cover any loopholes in the legislation. So much for the sensitivity of the Secretary of State for the wounded Unionist population of the Province.

What are the problems that remain? What other part of the United Kingdom would make it illegal to fly the national flag on all but a small number of days? Members will notice that regulation 9 says:

> Prohibition on the flying of flags other than in accordance with the Regulations.
>
> Except as provided by these Regulations, no flag shall be flown at any government building—

that includes the Union flag—

> at any time.

In what other part of the United Kingdom is that a reality? That is what the legislation does. It is not legislation to provide for the flying of the flag, but primarily legislation that bans the flying of the national flag over Government buildings. It does not provide for the flying of the flag over Stormont. The buildings over which the flag is required to be flown are limited and, worse, subject to being sidelined. For example, the headquarters of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure does not appear to be on the list of buildings over which the flag has to fly. Indeed, the regulations can be avoided if the headquarters of other Departments change or a new building is established. The list of buildings is frozen in time. It is a recipe for the flying of the flag to wither away over time. New buildings are specifically excluded from consideration.

This is a farce. What sort of legislation is it that it can so easily be avoided and evaded? It is legislation that will pass the test of humouring a section of the community in the short term, while forcing Sinn Fein-IRA to do nothing in the long term. This is the type of solution that other hon. Members may be used to—strong on illusion, weak on reality.

Such is the limitation on the flying of the Union flag that even 12 July is excluded. I regard that as a calculated insult to the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. No doubt, the convenient justification—we have heard it—is the practice in the rest of the United Kingdom. That may be a justification if we in Northern Ireland had all the same rights and rules as those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Can the Secretary of State assist me in understanding where else in the United Kingdom it is illegal to fly the Union flag? What other part of the United Kingdom has a prohibition on the flying of the Union flag on Government buildings? What other Parliament would pass legislation to declare legality for the flying of its national flag and, at the same time, declare it illegal to fly it for 348 days a year? This is Northern Ireland post the Belfast agreement. It is a society where terrorists sit in government, where the Royal Ulster Constabulary will be disbanded and where the flying of the Union flag will be illegal for 95 per cent. of the year. These regulations are no solution. I believe that this is an example of a dimmer switch on British culture in Northern Ireland.

11.42 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I want to make a point about Clifford Forsythe. I had enormous pleasure working with him on a Select Committee for all the years that he was in the House. My grandmother's phrase for Clifford would be that he was one of God's gentlemen. I would not want that side of his character not to be recorded tonight.

I much enjoyed talking to Clifford about Northern Ireland and Irish politics. While he was a passionate Unionist he was also balanced in his debates. I should tell my hon. Friends that it is important to remember in these debates that the cornerstone for the Belfast agreement was that Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom until people vote otherwise. There are other points in the agreement about proper respect, but that is the cornerstone.

One could not know Clifford and not also record that he believed that there was a range of views to which he was totally opposed, but that he believed were legitimate if they were not backed by the gun. I must tell my friends on the Opposition Benches that, while I more than sympathise with the anguish that they bring to these debates, it is important when debating these matters that, while we hold to central points, we also link with that the fact that, as democrats, there are other views with which we may disagree but which are totally legitimate for people to hold and to press in debates in order to seek to win over others.

As I have said, it is clear that the cornerstone of the Belfast agreement is that Northern Ireland remains a part of this country until people vote otherwise. Given that agreement, it is proper that the nature of the United Kingdom should be affirmed from public buildings.

11.44 pm

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): The task before us today is to disentangle the nature of the Union flag. The Union flag needs to fly on Government buildings when it is the symbol of the agreement in Belfast that Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom. It must not be used to make a different statement, as sometimes happens in other parts of the United Kingdom. We know of political parties that try to assert that they have a particular relationship with the Union flag. There is one particular party that, I feel, has little right to make that statement, for it is exclusive and extremist—*[Interruption.]* I am trying to take this issue seriously. The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) was listened to with great seriousness, although some of the things that he said were, I thought, inappropriate for this occasion.

The Government are properly attempting to identify those occasions on which the Union flag can reasonably be accepted—even by those who, in a referendum, would say that they do not wish to be part of the United Kingdom—as the symbol of statehood. That is a proper use of the Union flag. I have to tell the hon. Member for

[Mr. John Gummer]

South Antrim (Rev. William McCrea) that it is a total distortion of the proposed regulations to suggest that they are about stopping people from flying the flag on other occasions. The proposals seek to entrench those occasions when, by flying the flag, the people of Northern Ireland assert the fact, which was accepted by all sides to the Belfast agreement, that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom unless and until it decides to be otherwise. That is why those occasions are identified.

There is an exact parallel between such use of the Union flag and use—if I may dare to move to a more controversial subject—of the European flag. The European flag is flown on those occasions on which we are asserting something that, for me, is a matter of joy and celebration—that we are part of the European Union. However, the European flag is not to be flown on occasions on which it would be merely an assertion of a partisan position.

I fly the European flag on other occasions to celebrate a particular point of view. When it is flown on Europe day, however, it does not celebrate a particular view, it makes a statement of fact. I am afraid that some of my colleagues do not like that fact.

Mr. Swayne: Hear, hear.

Mr. Gummer: On that one occasion, however, they have to accept that fact. They can fight about it the rest of the time, but, on that one occasion, they should accept that we are making a factual and not a partisan statement. With great respect to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), that is a very important parallel.

I should like to finish my comments by saying something to my Unionist friends. As one who is in that curious position of being Catholic-Unionist, I have to say that I do not think that the Unionist cause would be helped by any attempt to claim the Union flag as a sectarian flag. It is not a sectarian flag. The moment that the Union flag is merely a symbol of those who happen to hold such a view, it ceases to be the flag that can fly from Government buildings.

The Union flag is the symbol of the fact that the people of Northern Ireland, by a majority, wish to be part of the United Kingdom. It is also a symbol of a democracy that says that if, by a majority, the people of Northern Ireland decide that they do not want to be part of the United Kingdom, no one is going to keep them there. However, as long as they do want to be part of the United Kingdom, that is their flag.

The Unionist people have to be very careful that they do not make it more difficult for the nationalist majority to accept that symbol for what it is by trying to pretend that it has some other connection. In that sense, I think that the Government's proposed regulations are perfectly proper. The fact that the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) may or may not have difficulties does not detract from the reality of the situation. We are choosing a series of occasions to affirm one thing—that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and will remain so unless and until the people want something different. That is what the flag symbolises and nothing more and, let me say to the hon. Member for Hull, North, nothing less either.

Mr. Wilshire: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has set about his Unionist friends. I suspect that he was pointing to those on the Bench in front of me, so I hope that he will allow me to say that I am one of his Unionist friends. I find it is most unfortunate that he is discussing as a sectarian symbol the same flag that I, as a Unionist and an Englishman, see as a statement of national sovereignty. Should he not see it in the same way?

Mr. Gummer: I have to say to my hon. Friend that I did not say that and I have to say something rather sharply to him. If he would only listen to those of us who are trying to bring together the two communities instead of constantly trying to see in what we say something that runs against his own prejudices, it might be that we who do not represent Irish seats can help those who do to bring the communities together instead of merely stoking the forces of division.

11.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): First, I welcome the hon. Member for South Antrim (Rev. William McCrea) back to the House. I am sure that all hon. Members will share the sentiments that he expressed about the late Clifford Forsythe. I am not sure whether a repeat maiden speech has quite the same standing, but it was in the best tradition of the House for the hon. Gentleman to pay tribute to his predecessor. It was a worthy tribute to a fine man and I am sure his family will be grateful, as will his constituents. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if, on this occasion, as probably on many others, I cannot endorse much of what he said, but the House will have noted that, in his absence from this place, he has lost none of his fiery style of presentation.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) asked a series of questions and I shall try to answer them as quickly as I can. The right hon. Gentleman, among others, asked whether the list of specified buildings could be reviewed and the regulations appropriately revised in due course. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State answered that, but I am happy to repeat what he said. No doubt there will be occasions, such as the creation of new buildings, when it will be appropriate to do that. As and when that becomes necessary, the appropriate revisions will be undertaken.

If a problem emerged over the death of a well-respected head of state, for example, or some other well-respected person in Northern Ireland, I would hope that it could be overcome by voluntary means, and I am sure that the right hon. Member for Bracknell joins me in that. However, if it becomes apparent that there is a problem, the appropriate revisions can be considered.

The right hon. Gentleman and others raised the question of Parliament buildings. Again, my right hon. Friend mentioned the solution to that. The right hon. Member for Bracknell and the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) will appreciate that the best solution would be for the Assembly to agree what is right, proper and appropriate. We have not lost all hope that it will do that in this and other matters involving flag-flying.

Time does not permit me to go into great detail on the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). I say to my hon. Friend—the same applies to the hon. Member for South Antrim—that he either ignores or misses the whole point of the Good Friday Agreement.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) gave good explanations of the current constitutional situation of Northern Ireland within the context of both the Good Friday agreement and where it sits within the UK. I will not add to that, but if my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North had listened carefully to those speeches, he would have had to accept that they were logical and expressed the situation very well.

I conclude by responding briefly to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik). He is always constructive and helpful in these debates and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I appreciate his contributions to the on-going process in which we are all involved.

I will not enter into the European debate on this issue—

It being one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Standing Order No. 16(1).*

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, which were laid before this House on 23 October, be approved.

SELECT COMMITTEE ON MODERNISATION OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ordered,

That Sir George Young be discharged from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and Mrs. Angela Browning be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

PETITION

Earl Shilton Bypass

11.56 pm

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): At almost midnight, I wish to present a petition on behalf of the Earl Shilton bypass action group. In my constituency Earl Shilton is an important community, and the bypass was planned nearly 20 years ago. Now, it is a priority scheme of Leicestershire county council. The bypass is particularly important and its significance is highlighted because a decision will be made in December about the additional allocation of resources for transport schemes.

The leaders behind the petition were in my advice bureau last week to argue the case, and I agreed without any doubt to deliver the petition tonight on behalf of the 2,500 petitioners in Earl Shilton.

The petition reads:

To the House of Commons:—

The Petition of the Earl Shilton by-pass action group declares that the reason for the petition is to indicate the strength of public feeling within the community with regard to accelerating the construction of the Earl Shilton by-pass, a project which has been part of the Hinckley and Bosworth borough council's and Blaby district council's local plans for almost two decades and is long overdue.

The petitioners therefore respectfully request that the House of Commons note the strength of feeling, indicated by the number of signatures, with a view to advising Ministers responsible for considering the bid for financial resources, made by the Leicestershire county council in its latest Local Transport Plan (LTP) to give it favourable consideration so that work may commence on construction without any further delay.

And the petitioners remain . . .

To lie upon the Table.

Unemployment (Bassetlaw)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

11.58 pm

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): I am grateful to have the opportunity to put the case of my constituents, and I would like to thank hon. Members, especially my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, for staying up until this late hour.

My constituency of Bassetlaw in North Notts is where three counties meet—Derbyshire, Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire. I am surrounded tonight by hon. Friends with problems similar to mine. My constituency covers 300 sq m, has 38 parish councils and also a traditional coal, textiles, food, glass and farming industry base. Like many other regions in the area, it was devastated by pit closures between 1986 and 1993.

In 1997 a new Labour Government came in and granted enterprise zone status to Bassetlaw, giving substantial tax breaks and aid to certain parts of the constituency. In January the outlook was so promising that the Bassetlaw development agency confidently forecast that 12,500 jobs would be created in that area of north Nottinghamshire and north Derbyshire in the very near future. That was just 10 months ago. The Manton Wood regeneration site attracted Solway Foods, Haslewood Foods, Cacao's French Chocolate and other firms, and other expansion created 1,000 jobs. However, since then this millennium year has consisted of 10 months of disaster.

Last January, Deema Glass at Harworth, which employed 420 people, went up for sale because its order books were running out. That caused much despair and distress in the area. The good news is that the firm is being bought by Marlin Lighting and Sylvania International, but no one knows how many jobs will be saved or what will be done with the firm.

In July, Courtaulds announced 650 job losses resulting from Marks and Spencer's policy of buying abroad rather than in Britain. Factories controlled by Courtaulds and supplying Marks and Spencer are in future to be built in Morocco and Sri Lanka. Courtaulds is training workers there to earn £20 and £13 a week to replace British jobs. In effect, it is exporting British jobs abroad.

Why should such small countries be allowed access to the European Union market? That will simply create more profit for Courtaulds. Although those small countries need to be bolstered with aid and have in the past received concessions, the profit created for Courtaulds in Morocco and Sri Lanka simply puts more workers in Worksop on the dole.

It gets worse. In September, Coats Viyella said that 260 jobs would be lost in Worksop. We must remember that about 18,000 people are in employment in Worksop, so losing 1,000 jobs is pretty devastating. Moreover, the effect of the Coats Viyella decision went beyond Worksop; all of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire is affected. Of the 3,000 jobs to go at Coats Viyella, 2,000 involved skilled workers in areas still reeling from pit closures.

On 29 September, the *Worksop Guardian* ran a story under the headline "Batchelors Bombshell". The sub-headline stated "450 Workers Face Axe in Factory Shock", and an article on the inside pages asked

"How much more can a town like Worksop take?"

Unilever announced that the 450 jobs at Batchelors were at risk because Unilever had formed a merger with United States food producer Bestfoods, which gave that firm too big a share of the market. Batchelors makes Oxo cubes, mushy peas, chicken noodles and other basic foods. However, Unilever will have to axe 25,000 jobs over the next five years, many of them in places such as Worksop.

Factories and jobs based in north Nottinghamshire and north Derbyshire are being moved around Europe as though they were chess pieces or counters on a monopoly board. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) is present for the debate. In his constituency, Johnsons, a firm run from Cologne, closed with 550 job losses, even though it had received a grant worth £1.75 million from the Department of Trade and Industry in 1991. Other jobs have been lost at the local breweries and other plants, which will in future be relocated to Czechoslovakia. That country wants to enter the EU in four years time, and such jobs will attract wages of £50 a week.

The steel firm Corus has plants in neighbouring Rotherham, Sheffield and Scunthorpe. Almost 4,000 of its workers have been made redundant nationwide—more than at Rover. Another 700 jobs have been lost at the Biwater plant on north-east Derbyshire. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) is present for the debate.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I am glad that reference has been made to the Biwater plant. The situation there is disgraceful. The multinational company Saint Gobain has moved in to buy the plant and close it, so that the order book can be stolen and moved overseas. The jobs lost will go to South America, China and elsewhere, even though there is a viable industry in this country producing material for overseas.

Mr. Ashton: My hon. Friend is right, and he has hit the nail on the head. These are not bust and derelict factories that are going rusty because their trade has been exhausted. They are suffering from a deliberate policy of wheeling and dealing in jobs from the north midlands region. There is not a level playing field within the EU in that regard. It is much cheaper to close down plants and transfer jobs in Britain than in other EU countries. That is why ours are the first to go. Redundancy costs are cheaper here because often the Government, not the factory, bear the cost.

European competition laws demand that new buyers must abide by the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981. It means that they have to pay the same wages. However, not very long after the transfer has been made, the new owner has taken over and the dust has begun to settle, a restructuring is allowed if market forces demand it. So the downsizing starts, because people can easily prove that the market demands restructuring.

Pension rights are not covered. Unilever provides very good pension rights, but there is no guarantee that the new buyer will maintain them. The new owners will constantly rationalise the industries to get their money back, and jobs will go.

Over the past 12 months, the forecast has been that north Nottinghamshire and north Derbyshire will lose 4,000 jobs, with only 1,600 being created. Unemployment could rise well over 5 per cent., and wages in our area are already £2 an hour below the national average.

The Government announced on 10 October that £800 million of aid would be given to the 88 most deprived areas of the country, yet unbelievably, although Bassetlaw is the eighth most deprived area in the east midlands development area, it was not included. I am not protesting about the fact that Bolsover—my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) is here—Mansfield, Ashfield, Rotherham, Doncaster and Sheffield will all receive some of the £800 million of extra aid for the most deprived areas, but why has Bassetlaw not been included?

We cannot understand why the new neighbourhood renewal fund that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions announced has a formula for inclusion that obviously does not include a place like my constituency, where unemployment has rocketed in the past 10 months. We have some very deprived areas; they were once thriving coal mining areas but sadly there has been nothing much there since the pit closures. We are seeing sweeping changes in north Nottinghamshire that are almost as bad as the pit closures in terms of the number of jobs lost.

There is chronic insecurity. Cottam power station, in my patch in Bassetlaw, has just been sold to London Electricity for £400 million. Seven hundred jobs are involved. What will happen to the people working there? Will there be redundancies? Nobody knows.

R.J.B. Mining, whose headquarters is at Harworth in my constituency, recently tried to sell the industry. Despite picking up a £75 million cash handout from the Government, it tried to do a deal with an American buyer, Renco.

We are all loyal supporters of the Government, and we accept that they are doing sterling work. They are doing marvellously well to bring in new jobs, but doing that takes at least two years from the planning stage to getting the grants, and the jobs are being lost virtually overnight. That is due not to redundancy but to the work being shifted to countries with cheap labour costs, such as Czechoslovakia or Hungary, which are trying to enter the European Union, or to existing EU countries where it is much more expensive to shut something down.

There must be some control of this wholesale wheeling and dealing in jobs. Lives, and even whole towns, are being destroyed by accountants, not because the industries are losing money but because they can make more money taking British jobs abroad. I am sure that I speak for my hon. Friends here tonight when I say that the workers cannot understand why the Government do not insist on some sort of EU regulation to stop this happening so easily and quickly.

12.9 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) on securing the time for this important debate. He has set out clearly and with great feeling—as I would expect of him—the issues that affect and have an impact on people in his constituency and, more generally, in north Nottinghamshire and the wider region.

I agree with him that it has been disappointing to see the level of job losses and factory closures in Bassetlaw and the neighbouring area, especially over the past few months. Certainly, the Government recognise that the north Nottinghamshire area is going through some fundamental changes. As my hon. Friend said, some recent changes have had a considerable impact on the local people.

The role of the Government in addressing such issues is threefold. First, the success or failure of an area and the activities in it are dependent on conditions in the economy as a whole. I hope that my hon. Friends will agree that we have worked hard to try to ensure that the economy is stable, and that, in turn, has enabled investment to be made in all our regions.

Secondly, we need to address the imbalances that exist in people's lives and opportunities—not only between regions, but within them. It is because we recognise those imbalances and because we want to bring those who are most disadvantaged up to the level of the best that we have introduced a strong regional economic development policy through the work of the regional development agencies. I know that is very important for the development of the east midlands.

Thirdly, in some instances, the Government can take specific action locally, as well as regionally and nationally, to respond to particular and sometimes critical circumstances, such as those described by my hon. Friend. Regeneration, unemployment and so on have to be addressed nationally, regionally and locally. I shall touch on those aspects, while also trying to address some of the points raised by my hon. Friend.

The message given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to the Birmingham chamber of commerce in August this year emphasised that the Government have an industrial policy based on three clear principles. First, we are trying to put in place the building blocks for the future—to enable industries to obtain the skills they need in their work force and to access the new knowledge bases that they need; and to ensure that they have the necessary communications infrastructure so as to create a strong enterprise culture in Britain.

Secondly, we are creating a modern regulatory framework that helps innovation and encourages growth and increased productivity. Modern economies are complex. Governments take a huge range of decisions that have an impact on industrial success. Our role is to ensure that sustainable wealth creation and business growth are at the heart of those decisions in Britain.

Thirdly, we are trying to provide world-class, forward-looking business support for businesses to expand at home and overseas—helping manufacturing and services. We are promoting innovation and providing opportunities for emerging industries and markets.

The core of that strategy is that we are trying to help industry and businesses to look to the future as the only way of ensuring sustained growth and employment. However, as a Government, we also have to consider the present. My hon. Friend is quite right to direct our focus on events currently occurring in his area. As industries restructure and the economy changes, some industries are facing traumatic change.

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

It is important to point out that we are not in the business of stopping change in industries that need to modernise. Propping up old ways of working and inefficient processes is not the way forward. However, we also need to help established industries in the regions to modernise and compete in new markets. We are trying to support people and communities through what are sometimes difficult periods of change.

We are investing in training and skills to ensure that those affected by such changes can find new, quality jobs. We are trying to encourage enterprise—to support new firms that have the potential to grow. We are stepping up our work on attracting new investment in growth industries, as well as helping companies in the supply chain to innovate and to adapt.

Cash injection can only ever be a partial solution, although it has a limited application. There have been some cash injections locally, to which I shall refer. However, we also need new instruments focused on giving companies the knowledge and capabilities that they need to succeed.

My hon. Friend laid great stress on what he felt was the impact of the potential for companies to move businesses—and therefore take jobs away—from this country to other parts of Europe and indeed the world, and he is right to identify the fact that there are global challenges to many of the businesses that are in this country. We have a very limited remit in respect of some of those challenges, as Government can have only a limited impact on the potential for companies to respond to opportunities elsewhere in the world. We are not unmindful of the issue, but the potential that we have, either alone or through Europe, to create what my hon. Friend called a level playing field is quite limited. However, I do recognise that those are real issues that companies in his area and elsewhere are facing.

Mr. Alan Meale (Mansfield): I understand what my hon. Friend is saying, but obviously there are instances in which the Government can act—for instance, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) intimated, regarding Czechoslovakia. That country is making an application to join the European Union and is basically giving away large sites, pre-built, for companies to move from western Europe before it enters the European Union, at costs with which, clearly, we cannot compete.

Secondly, we have policy in relation to the Department of Trade and Industry, which is paying, and has paid, huge sums of money to multinational companies to come to coal mining areas such as north Nottinghamshire. In the instance of Johnson Control, £1.7 million was given to that company, and at the same time was refused to local companies that wanted to expand. Companies come in, make a fast buck and then sell out on to the open market and move overseas and make money there. Obviously that is not a sensible policy in terms of countries that want to join the European Union, over which we have control in terms of the directives that we can oppose. We could also say that we will not be any part of the Treasury policy in future.

Mr. Hughes: I take the points that my hon. Friend makes. I would simply put it to him that we cannot make such changes in European regulations and directives unilaterally. Such changes have to be made through processes at European level, and there are wider issues. This is a difficult thing for my hon. Friends to hear, and I understand that, but there are wider issues pertaining to the reasons why we want, and are encouraging, certain countries to join the European Union. I understand what my hon. Friend is saying about the way that he feels—that some of those countries are using their pre-entry position to entice businesses, but that is something that, in terms of our own internal national policy, is very difficult for us to regulate.

Mr. Meale: I understand where my hon. Friend is coming from, but there is a difficulty. We can influence directives. We can oppose them at the Council of Ministers. Clearly Britain is being affected prior to these countries' application. The textile industry in Britain is being riven by companies moving from this country abroad. The car industry and the glass industry are similarly losing out to Czechoslovakia. We can say through the Council of Ministers that we are sorry but we object to these directive concessions.

Mr. Hughes: Well, we can, and we could in theory, but that raises some fundamental issues that must be dealt with across government. It is not simply a DETR question; it is not simply a DTI question. My hon. Friend is raising—I understand why, and he is right to do so—very fundamental questions, which would have to be decided at the heart of government and at the highest level. I am afraid that, as he knows, I am not in a position to give him a response on that here tonight, but I will ensure that the views that he has expressed on these issues will be heard and will go to the relevant Departments.

I wanted to touch on what the Government are trying to do to assist at the regional level and to tackle imbalances between regions. All my hon. Friends will be aware of the work being done by the East Midlands development agency, with which they have all had contact. It is trying to deal with some of the problems that they have raised tonight.

As a result of this year's comprehensive spending review, Government support for the regional development agencies will increase from £1.2 billion a year now to £1.7 billion in 2004. Clearly, some of those resources will go to the east midlands to try to tackle some of the issues that have been raised.

Mr. Barnes: The problem is that many areas face immediate difficulties that will not be dealt with by developments that will make changes in the future. Emergency action needs to be taken in certain areas. At the Labour party conference, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that

> when there is real pressure and difficulties in areas like textiles, coal and steel and in specific plants like Biwater in Clay Cross—we must not stand to one side. We won't walk away.

In the case of a viable firm, such as Biwater in Clay Cross, reference should surely be made to the Competition Commission, because it has the right to say that certain

moves are hitting exports, creating unemployment and distorting industry in various areas. Therefore, action can be taken to stop such moves. Such action is required.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The Minister must reply to one intervention before she gives way to another.

Ms Hughes: I will deal with the specific points that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) raised, but I am perfectly happy to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) and give a composite response to their questions.

Mr. Skinner: The Government have decent intentions, but the two years of Tory spending plans did not help and we have lost a lot of time. The pits were closed in most areas and the women in many pit villages worked in textiles. They were the breadwinners, but they have now lost their jobs. In many constituencies jobs have been lost, and in Bolsover alone in the past seven months, 800 jobs have been lost and most of them were held by women. They feel that no one is helping them.

We have made a proposition for massive infrastructural changes. They will need a bob or two, but the Government are not short of money. Development at a junction just off the M1 would provide about 9,000 jobs and a link between the M1 and the A1 would make the area just like Corby. Remember Corby? The steel industry went but a link road was built. The net result was that the whole area blossomed in terms of industry. Similar action is necessary in my area and it must be done sharpish. We have got to save the Clay Cross Biwater plant, too.

Ms Hughes: In terms of a hard-edged response to some of the local issues, I am a little surprised that my hon. Friend did not mention the rapid response fund. The Government-led response group was established to help the workers affected by large-scale redundances and the closure of the Coats Viyella factories throughout the east midlands, including in Worksop. I am sure that my hon. Friend will know that rapid response funding of more than £1 million for people affected by the closure or scaling down of Coats Viyella sites in the area has taken place. That money will help people to retrain and it relates to the points that he made about the need for money to help people access jobs by improving transport links or by enabling them to develop new skills.

At Courtaulds, £300,000 of rapid response funding has been agreed to alleviate difficulties caused by the closure of its factory in Worksop. At Johnson Control Automotive (UK) Ltd. in Mansfield, I understand that a bid for rapid response funding is to be made shortly and that it is likely to be for more than £250,000. Similarly, in south Yorkshire, which borders the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw, rapid response funding of more than £1 million has helped redundant workers to find jobs.

I understand that change has impacted in many ways on family members, particularly in the textile industry. My hon. Friends will know that, in response to the industry-led textile clothing strategy group's report, in June this year my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry unveiled a plan to help the textile industry adapt and improve to meet global changes in the sector. It offers a number of practical measures to support the industry directly through its supply chain and retailers. The point about the need for a new junction on the M1 to help people to access jobs is important. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover will know that the matter is progressing and I hope that there will be a favourable outcome.

Difficult decisions had to be made concerning the neighbourhood renewal fund. The top 50 authorities that scored on any one of the six measures of deprivation received the funding. As has been said, they included Mansfield and Bolsover, but not Bassetlaw.

I hope that my hon. Friends accept that the Government are trying in a number of ways to address the problems that their areas face. However, the Government cannot change the situation locally without the kind of partnerships on the ground that I know my hon. Friends want to support. We recognise the many real difficulties that people face, and we are trying, nationally, regionally and locally, to create opportunities whereby local partners can begin to turn the situation around.

I recognise the many difficult issues that have been raised tonight and, as far as I can, I shall take those up with the Departments within whose remits they lie. But I hope that my hon. Friends will accept that at those three levels the Government are trying to address the problems that they have rightly outlined tonight and that we recognise.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-seven minutes past Twelve o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 26 October 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

REPORT OF INQUIRY INTO BOVINE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY

Resolved,

That there shall be laid before this House a Return of the Report, evidence and supporting papers of the Inquiry into the emergence and identification of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) and variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) in the United Kingdom, and the action taken in response to it up to 20th March 1996, by Lord Phillips of Worth Matravers.—[*Mr. Nick Brown*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

New Deal

1. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What action is being taken to increase the support offered to young people in the new deal gateway. [132585]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): I know that we will all want to welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker.

I can announce today that 244,000 young people have moved from benefit into jobs, helped by the new deal and the Government's sound economic management. That means that there are now more people in work than ever before. The new deal is equipping young people with the skills to take up the jobs that are coming up all over the country. We will continue to improve and intensify the support for the increasing numbers of disadvantaged young people, tackling their problems of numeracy, literacy and basic employability, so that they can not just get a job but enjoy the prospect and opportunity of staying in work for the rest of their lives.

Helen Jackson: Welcome, Mr. Speaker.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the hallmarks of the Government was the speed with which they moved when they came to power in 1997 to get young people off the dole and give them a life with some hope? Some 477 people in my constituency are now in work and off the dole. What further steps will the Government take to continue that programme, so that allowing youngsters to spend years on the dole becomes a part of history?

Ms Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for the support that she provides to the new deal in her constituency. When we came to office in 1997, 80,000 young people had been out of work for a year or more. The figure is now 6,500. However, the challenge is getting greater. About one in five young people comes to the new deal with barely the reading age of a seven-year-old. There are other types of disadvantage which mean that, as unemployment falls, so we must intensify and increase the help available to young people not just in my hon. Friend's constituency but throughout the country. The new deal will do that.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I welcome and congratulate you, Mr. Speaker.

Is the Minister familiar with the Industrial Society's critique of the new deal, published in two reports over the past few weeks? Is she aware that the society criticised the new deal in a number of ways, and revealed that 40 per cent. of jobs gained by new deal participants last less than 30 weeks? It also revealed that in the 20 areas of worst joblessness, unemployment is twice the national average. The society suggested, in particular, that the crucial gateway phase of the new deal is chronically underfunded. Is the Minister going to refute or disregard those findings from an independent and well-respected body, or does she have detailed proposals to deal with those particular problems?

Ms Jowell: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his first outing at the Dispatch Box. I have studied the Industrial Society report closely and I know that it has been selectively quoted by the hon. Gentleman. We are used to that from the Opposition, who offer no solution to long-term unemployment among young people, but only attack them and their right to opportunity. The Industrial Society praises the new deal, identifies the unique contribution of personal advisers, and praises the benefits reported by young people themselves. We recognise that in areas of low employment, the new deal must do more and work harder, which is why it is working with action teams, established by this Government, in the 40 districts where unemployment is at its highest.

We will take no lessons from the Opposition on how to manage unemployment. Under the Conservatives, on three occasions the claimant count rose to 3 million in the 1980s and early 1990s. They failed to deal with unemployment, whereas we are tackling it. Long-term unemployment among young people is down by 70 per cent. since the election. That is a tribute to young people and we are proud of that.

Mr. Speaker: That was a full and frank answer, but we have to get through the Order Paper.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend will recall the meeting that I had with her and her civil servants about my proposals for a new deal overseas programme to allow thousands of our young

people and 50-plus new dealers to go overseas to work and train in third-world countries. Is there any progress on that front?

Ms Jowell: I hope to be able to write to my hon. Friend very soon about his interesting and constructive proposals, and to build his ideas into the flexibility and diversity of help and support that we intend to continue to provide through the new deal.

School Meals

2. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): What guidelines he issues on the proportion of children at a comprehensive school who should be able to sit down for school dinner within the allocated lunchtime break. [132586]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): The Government recognise the importance of an enjoyable and well-balanced school meal, and that is why we are introducing minimum nutritional standards for school lunches—the first for 20 years. However, it is for schools to decide how to organise the delivery of lunches to pupils who want them, so we have issued no guidelines on how many children should be served in the lunch break.

Mr. Jack: I thank the Minister for that answer. I think that her Department is aware that the Lytham St. Anne's high technology college in my constituency, the largest comprehensive in Lancashire, is daily turned into what I can only describe as a culinary battleground, as there are seats for only one sixth of the 1,800 or so children to have a school dinner. The remainder who want to find a place to eat their sandwiches are scattered to the four winds in the rest of the site. That is unacceptable. The head and other senior staff members have to give up their dinner hour to supervise the maelstrom. Will the Minister be kind enough—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have appealed for brief answers, and I also expect brief questions.

Mr. Jack: The question will be brief, Mr. Speaker.

Will the Minister be kind enough to get one of her officials to visit the school and see the chaos, and then have discussions with Lancashire county council to find a lasting solution to the problem?

Jacqui Smith: I note that the right hon. Gentleman has taken a close interest in this problem. I understand that, despite the fact that the school has received more than £1 million to expand and more than £700,000 because its specialist status, the problem remains. Perhaps I can make some positive suggestions. The Government have already supported lunch facility improvements at 117 schools, through all phases of the new deal for schools. I do not believe that Lancashire applied for funding through that scheme. The expansion of direct capital funds for heads to spend—this year, for example, Lytham St. Anne's high school has had just over £30,000 from those funds—may prove a way forward.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced that the funding will increase by two and a half times by 2003–04 and can be rolled over from year to year to fund larger projects. The seed challenge capital process, which we have also extended to more schools—under which a contribution can be matched from funds from outside the school—may also be a way forward. Given the right hon. Gentleman's persistence, I am willing to ask one of my officials to visit the school to investigate the problem.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): The introduction of nutritional standards for school meals is a massive step forward. What research are the Government undertaking to boost the low take-up of free school meals? Will my hon. Friend applaud the hugely popular initiative by Squirrel Hayes first school in Biddulph, which has introduced a free breakfast service, which means that pupils are in on time and ready to start the day and learn appropriately?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I commend the activities of that school in her constituency, which is one of very many schools being given the support that is provided through Education Extra and our partners, Kellogg's, to develop breakfast clubs. I agree that we also need to ensure that those children who are eligible for free school meals take them up. That is why the Department has funded the Child Poverty Action Group to carry out research into what prevents the take-up from being as full as it could be, and to come up with practical suggestions on how we can improve the situation by next spring.

Disruptive Pupils

3. **Mr. Vernon Coaker** (Gedling): What plans he has to help schools to improve standards of behaviour. [132587]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): The Government have improved both in-school and off-site provision to help schools to tackle disruption. As part of a £174 million a year programme, we intend to create 1,000 on-site learning support units so that heads and teachers can remove pupils quickly when they are disrupting classes, but we have also expanded provision for excluded pupils: there are now 1,000 more places and 250 more teachers in out-of-school pupil referral units than in 1997. We intend that all excluded pupils will have full-time education by 2002. With more in-school welfare staff, we hope also to help schools to prevent problems before they happen.

Mr. Coaker: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. It is good news that provision—such as learning support units and pupil referral units—is being made for pupils who cause problems in school. However, what plans does my hon. Friend have to consult directly with the young people who are excluded from school to find out about their experience and perception of the system? Does she agree that finding out what they believe to be among the causes of their alienation could help inform the provision that is made for them? They, too, are entitled to educational support, just as are those pupils who remain in school.

Jacqui Smith: Given my hon. Friend's experience of working in schools, it is no surprise that he should ask such an important and sensible question. Departmental officials regularly meet young people who have been

excluded from school. Such meetings formed part of a recent review of the social exclusion pupil support fund, and in the future they will form part of a review of the standards in pupil referral units.

In addition, it is important to note that we are working with partners in the voluntary sector to develop innovative programmes for excluded and disaffected young people. For example, we have made money available to Ultralab at Anglia university to bring together excluded young people using information and communication technology for both teaching and mentoring. We have also made available further funding for Rathbone to help the further development of what has been a very successful key stage 4 programme for young people at risk of disaffection. For the first time, that programme will be extended to children in the key stage 3 age group. Moreover, the historically large amount of money that the Government are putting into such projects means that, if successful, they have the potential to be expanded.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): May I welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker? You will get 100 per cent. support from me and my colleagues.

Liberal Democrat Members appreciate the work being done to tackle the problem of disruptive behaviour in schools, to which there is no easy solution. However, does the Minister agree that two groups of young people need to be targeted? Children with special needs are seven times more likely to be excluded from school than other pupils, and Afro-Caribbean youngsters are four times more likely than others to be excluded because of poor behaviour. What are the Government doing for them? The chief inspector of schools refuses to turn the Ofsted spotlight on to the reasons for the exclusion of those young people and their poor behaviour. The Government cannot allow that to continue.

Jacqui Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight those groups. We hope to have an impact on the unacceptable figure that he quoted with regard to children with special educational needs through the expanded funding that we have made available, improved teacher training and a greater concentration on early identification of those children's special needs.

We were encouraged by the most recent figures on exclusions among young people from ethnic minorities, which showed that there had been a larger fall in exclusions among such children than in other groups. However, I agree that we must continue the efforts that we have already made—for example, with regard to identifying barriers to achievement for those young people. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will do so.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): My hon. Friend will accept that the wide range of disturbed and disturbing behaviour among pupils of all ages would benefit from parental involvement in schools. In addition to the home-school contracts that already exist, what action would she encourage schools to take to improve their contact with parents and so deal with the behaviour that I have described?

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We take very seriously the issue of parents' involvement in their children's education. My hon. Friend will know that earlier this term, the Department made available to schools and parents a guide containing information about the national curriculum. The aim was not to preach at parents but to give them practical tips on how to engage with their children's schools and learning. We want to ensure that standards are raised and, as my hon. Friend noted, to pre-empt those issues which make teaching very difficult and which can lead to disaffection.

My hon. Friend is right: parents need to be involved. She referred to home-school agreements, but we have implemented a range of other, practical measures to involve parents in their children's schooling.

Citizenship Education

4. **Mr. Roger Casale** (Wimbledon): What further plans he has to promote the teaching of democracy and citizenship in schools; and if he will make a statement. [132588]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): Citizenship education will become part of the national curriculum for secondary schools from August 2002 in a discrete subject. We are making available £12 million to schools for personal, social and health education development, together with citizenship, £5 million of which will be earmarked for citizenship education and the preparation of materials.

In addition, we are working with long-standing voluntary organisations on the development of schemes of work on a citizenship website and on seminars for teachers at regional level, as well as developing and spreading best practice from schools that are already implementing this in their own syllabuses.

Mr. Casale: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. He will be aware of initiatives such as Scottish Charities Kosovo Appeal and London South-East Direct Aid to Kosovo, which are supported by many Members on both sides of the House. They are working to raise money in schools in this country, including Wimbledon Chase middle school in my constituency, to invest in the rebuilding of schools in Kosovo. In those rebuilt schools, some of the most important items on the curriculum will be the teaching of democracy and respect for human rights.

If we seek to promote an understanding of democracy abroad with some authority, is it not incumbent on us to promote a better understanding of democracy in our own schools? Is it not a matter of regret that the Opposition Front Bench education team failed to turn up yesterday when the statutory instrument that gives rise to some of the measures that my right hon. Friend mentioned earlier was before the House?

Mr. Blunkett: I am sure that there must have been some profound reason why the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) did not make it. It is probably best not to go into that this morning.

These are important issues—the maintenance of our democracy, active citizenship and the encouragement of young people to take seriously their contribution to the community and understand how that fits in with the broader issues of world citizenship. That is why we are giving £50,000 to the Council for Education in World Citizenship to ensure that its continuing work can be developed and disseminated in schools.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I do not think that anyone would quarrel with citizenship. However, if I may hark back to an earlier question, active citizenship must also involve parents. I was appalled to discover—and it is as much to my shame as anyone's—that at one comprehensive school in my constituency, 17 per cent. of pupils last year left without a single GCSE pass in any subject. At another school, 11 per cent. of pupils left without a GCSE pass in a single subject. When I asked one of the head teachers about this, he said that it was simply because quite a lot of pupils did not turn up because they were playing truant, and that there was a lack of parental support.

Mr. Speaker: I must appeal again to hon. Members to ask a question, not make a mini-speech. The hon. Gentleman has made his point, and the Secretary of State will reply.

Mr. Blunkett: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the measures that the Home Secretary and I announced last week will tackle the problem of truancy and ensure that children go to school. They will continue the programme to reduce the number of children who leave school without any qualification—it has already gone down from 8 per cent. to 5.6 per cent. under this Government. We want to ensure that if we can get children into school, they are taught well and imaginatively. We use vocational education to engage those who had previously been alienated by being unable to engage with the traditional curriculum.

Connexions Service

5. **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): If he will make a statement on the involvement of voluntary and statutory youth services in the new Connexions service. [132589]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): The Connexions service will work very closely with both the statutory youth services and local voluntary organisations. That is vital to the success of Connexions and is therefore central to our policy.

On Monday, the 16 partnership areas invited to run the Connexions service from April 2001 were announced; they will, in total, receive £47 million more than the careers services in those areas currently receive.

Mr. Hope: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. He knows of my concern that the youth service was neglected and underfunded for so many years under the Tories. The Connexions service offers a real opportunity to combine the careers and youth services to provide a good transition from childhood to adulthood for many young people. Can my hon. Friend assure me that youth workers—who are being used in and embedded into the service—are not diverted from the effective youth work that they would otherwise be doing and that some youth projects will not fall by the wayside as an unintended consequence of the way in which the new Connexions service is being implemented?

Mr. Wicks: We are ambitious about the future of the youth service. Whether it is statutory, voluntary or both, it is the way to study ways to prevent some of the problems that face our young people. We should recognise that despite the excellent youth service work, the system nationally is patchy—some of it is not up to scratch. I hope to say more about the future of the youth service and its vital role in relation to Connexions in the coming weeks.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I also welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker, and wish you well in the challenges that lie ahead.

Connexions brings together the youth and careers services—the personal advisers. However, will the Minister confirm that advisers have been told to focus their work on disaffected young people and that as a result the mainstream majority of average to bright pupils who need careers advice will now be neglected? Is the Minister proud of creating a new group of socially excluded?

Mr. Wicks: I will not confirm that statement because it is simply not true and it will mislead parents and teachers. Connexions has a major aim to help each and every young person aged 13 to 19 to make informed choices about learning options, education, the world of work and careers—each and every young person. Every school will get its fair share of the Connexions service. Within that, we have a special mission to help those young people who, because of socio-economic disadvantages, are not getting a fair deal. The Connexions service will also have a special mission to help young people of high ability—the particularly gifted—to make choices about learning. It is a universal service for each and every young person, with a special focus on helping those particular needs. That is the truth and it is important that we state it.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I welcome Monday's announcement that more than £300,000 is being allocated to Suffolk to set up the new Connexions service in my constituency and others. On the careers choice element of that service, does my hon. Friend agree that as well as looking at leaflets and ticking boxes to work out what interests them, our young people can also benefit when people from industry, public services and the armed forces go to schools, not merely into colleges? They can inspire young people to pursue such career paths. I have not seen that happening as much as it used to do. Will my hon. Friend give guidance to promote that sort of careers advice?

Mr. Wicks: It is important that schools help young people to understand the economy and the world of work. Schools and Connexions need to work together to raise the quality of that sort of experience. Yes, there should be the traditional work experience, but as my hon. Friend says, we should enable people in different professions and occupations to go into schools and establish links with them. More companies and public services should help schools with that endeavour. It is an important point.

School Transport

6. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will review the requirements on local education authorities in respect of home-to-school transport. [132590]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): Each of us has welcomed and congratulated you, Mr. Speaker. I am sure that one thing you will do is spot recidivism. I therefore congratulate the hon. Gentleman on asking the same question three times. The answer remains the same, at least in its preamble. We have no plans to review the legislation on home-to-school transport. The school travel advisory group has recommended a number of ways to promote more affordable, safe, environmentally friendly and acceptable forms of transport and, with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, we shall wish to pursue those.

Mr. Heath: Consistency is a virtue, is it not?

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the present system is the single biggest cause of friction between parents and local education authorities? It causes chaos outside many schools and penalises rural local education authorities. Roads and social conditions nowadays are very different from what they were in 1944. Is it not time that we had a serious look at the situation and produced plans for a comprehensive integrated system of the sort that so many other countries enjoy?

Mr. Blunkett: I am strongly in favour of those at local level—schools and local authorities—considering a more integrated and imaginative way of dealing with that matter. However, 800,000 pupils use school transport every day and the latest estimates are that about £444 million of local and national money goes into school transport. It is a very complicated issue, which is why we have advised members of the hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench team not to say lightly that it can be delegated and devolved to schools, which could not co-ordinate, organise or produce exactly the kind of plans that the hon. Gentleman appears to be encouraging us to take up this morning.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Congratulations and welcome, Mr. Speaker.

Can I persuade my right hon. Friend to continue with the impetus for a national strategy? He has been working closely with DETR, but the issue is important for children's health and safety and for reducing the dreadful congestion on our roads. This half-term, people can drive freely and quickly around the country, but they cannot do so when parents are taking their children to school. This is an important health and safety matter, and I hope that my hon. Friend continues his work with DETR to make a real change to benefit children's health.

Mr. Blunkett: First, may I apologise for transferring the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) from one party to another in my remarks about the Opposition Front Bench. I shall keep my fingers crossed for him at the general election.

My hon. Friend is entirely right—the safety and environmental issues are considerable. It is also important to ensure that there is less traffic on the roads at peak times is also important. Anyone who travels during this half-term will be aware of the difference that school runs make, especially in core cities. We therefore need to examine how to integrate the way in which we encourage walking and safety, together with a reduction in pollution and congestion on our roads.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I congratulate you on your election, Mr. Speaker.

Is the Secretary of State aware of the great safety issue with regard to school transport, which concern many parents, in that although vehicles are rightly fitted with seat belts, there is no one in authority to ensure that children use them? Parents beg children to do so; schools tell children to do so; but given that drivers must concentrate on driving only, more often than not children do not belt up. What can be done before there is a terrible accident, after which everyone will say, "This should not have been allowed to happen".

Mr. Blunkett: As the hon. Lady will be aware, following tragedies in the past a tremendous campaign was run and agreement was reached on the provision of seat belts in vehicles that transport schoolchildren. We all—parents, not simply teachers—have a responsibility to educate children in the safe use of those vehicles. We cannot supervise children all the time in and out of situations that are external to the school, but we can encourage and support those who have influence over children—the prime educators, including parents—to get it right.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I add my congratulations on your election, Mr. Speaker, and offer you best wishes for the future.

Buses on which children travel to school are not fitted with seat belts in all parts of the United Kingdom. In fact, there is real concern among parents that their children are at risk, especially when standing in buses. What assessment has been made of the cost of a policy of ensuring that every child travelling to school on a public service vehicle is guaranteed a seat fitted with a seatbelt?

Mr. Blunkett: I do not have that information, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman. However, the contracting systems often lead to the lowest contract price being chosen. That is a real issue in some parts of the country. We are aware of the difficulty in ensuring that we match safety and cost in an acceptable fashion.

There is no doubt that translating every available public service vehicle to other uses—that, of course, is part of the effort to integrate school transport into the wider transport needs of dispersed communities—would be very expensive. I shall, however, consult my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and write to the hon. Gentleman with the information that he seeks.

Class Sizes (Devon)

7. **Mr. Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter): What progress has been made in reducing primary class sizes in Devon; and if he will make a statement. [132592]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): The number of primary pupils in classes of 31 or more in Devon has fallen by 6,500 since January 1998. The reduction for infant classes has been even

greater, with only 810 children in classes of 31 or more in January this year, compared with more than 5,600 in January 1998.

Mr. Bradshaw: Parents and teachers in Exeter are pleased that the Government have more than delivered on their class size pledge, and that they have done so ahead of time. Four years ago, some of my classes had more than 40 pupils. There has also been a significant impact on standards. What will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that the figures continue to fall and that standards continue to rise?

Ms Morris: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I am delighted that standards are increasing in schools in his constituency, 14 of which have extra teachers as a result of the class size policy, and two of which have extra classrooms. That is key to realising the essential good start that children need in their education. I assure my hon. Friend that class sizes for very young children will remain central to our standards policy.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): Class sizes may be going down in Exeter but they are going up in south Devon. Is the Minister aware that 90,000 new homes are proposed for Devon but that schools in my constituency are already crammed to the gunnels and that children are already having to travel two hours each way by bus to get to school? Is not the best way to make progress to rehabilitate schools such as the Stoke Fleming primary school? School sites that already exist should be developed and more children should go to those schools, which are already good and performing well. Does the Minister accept that she will not succeed in reducing class numbers unless she either builds new schools or refurbishes old ones?

Ms Morris: Just to be clear, class sizes in Devon in infant, junior and primary schools have gone down. It is a local authority's responsibility to plan places for children who move into an area.

I am not familiar with the school that the hon. Gentleman named, but if he writes to me about it, I shall address the matter. The class size policy has resulted in extra classrooms being built. New schools are being built across the country to deal with the mobility problem to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): May I first congratulate you, Mr. Speaker?

I welcome the fall in class sizes in Devon and throughout the country. Does it not beggar belief to hear criticisms from Conservatives who, during the previous Parliament, said that class size did not matter?

Has my right hon. Friend observed developments in the American presidential election, where commitments are being made to reduce class sizes to fewer than 20 pupils? Perhaps we should consider building on the substantial achievements that we have already made in primary schools and seek, in the next Parliament, to reduce class sizes in primary schools even further.

Ms Morris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. The Opposition would, of course, abolish the standards fund, which would remove the means of funding reductions in class sizes in infant schools, which is key to the standards agenda. We were right to concentrate on class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds because evidence from Ofsted shows that that is where class sizes matter most.

Our standards fund initiative also involves placing 20,000 extra classroom assistants in primary schools. Many primary school heads also welcome extra adults in the classroom. I suspect that in future that imaginative combination of placing well-skilled and well-trained adults in primary schools and increasing the number of teachers—both those efforts were achieved by this Government—will help to realise our key aims, which include high standards.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Earlier, the right hon. Lady discussed the dangers of being selective, but is she not running just that risk? Although primary school classes have gone down in Devon, secondary class sizes have gone up by more than the amount by which primary class sizes have been reduced and by more than the average secondary school class size increase in the rest of England. Is it the right hon. Lady's case that secondary class sizes do not matter? Or is she going to admit now that, taking secondary and primary class sizes together, the Government's policy has failed? Will she now admit that failure to the parents and pupils in Devon?

Ms Morris: A conversion—not only do the Opposition think that primary school class size matters, but they now believe that secondary school class size matters, too. That is a policy announcement. No, I was not being selective; the question was about primary school class sizes, which is why I did not refer to secondary school class sizes, but I shall do so now as the hon. Gentleman has asked me.

In Devon—indeed, across the country—if schools choose to use the special grant which the Secretary of State has made available to them, they could not only reduce that increase but double it. They could reduce class sizes by 0.8 per cent. The special grant puts the decision in the hands of head teachers who lead our secondary schools, so if they choose to make class sizes smaller that is their choice. The money is theirs. It is not ring-fenced; it is used for standards. If teachers choose to use it to reduce class size, they will do that. We will then have achieved classes of under 30 for infants and reduced class sizes in key stages 1 and 2, and put resources into secondary schools for heads to use at their discretion to reduce class sizes if they so wish.

Teaching Standards

9. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): If he will make a statement on his plans to raise standards in teaching in further education and sixth-form colleges. [132594]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): The Department's further education standards fund, which is targeted at improving quality in colleges, is already contributing to rising standards. The fund will increase to £160 million in 2001-02. That is a significant investment alongside the recent £50 million increase in funding for further education lecturers' pay. We are committed to

further action and will announce a qualifications and professional development policy for FE lecturers next month.

Dr. Starkey: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. I am sure he will agree that further education is important as a route into higher education for a number of pupils from disadvantaged groups. It is extremely important that standards are improved. Will my hon. Friend confirm that one third of full-time teachers in further education currently lack professional teaching qualifications? Is that not a further demonstration of the dereliction of duty on the part of the Tory Government who failed to invest properly in providing education across the board for all?

Mr. Wicks: I can confirm that one third of FE teachers have no teaching qualification, and I take my hon. Friend's points about the Tory party during its lamentable stewardship. What is crucial is that the FE sector now has a vital role to play with the establishment of learning and skills councils, meeting the needs and demands of local economies and communities. It is a sector for the future. We have to place a special emphasis on quality and qualifications, so that we can raise the status of the sector, as we must, and of this important professional group of people.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Surely the Minister is ignoring the crisis in FE colleges. He will know of the excellent Weymouth college in my constituency where the group of people doing the majority of sixth-form teaching are FE lecturers. What of their standards of pay? The additional funding that has gone into all sorts of schools initiatives has passed them by. They are now in competition with people starting up new sixth forms where the teachers are much better paid. That is a continuing crisis. The Government said that they would solve it, but they have not. They have done nothing about it. It gets worse and worse. When will we get some action rather than warm words?

Mr. Wicks: Not done anything about it? Fifty million pounds extra is going into FE teachers' pay. That is doing something about it, and that is only phase 1. We recognise that those teaching young people both in sixth-form colleges and in further education colleges are making the point about salary vis-a-vis those teaching in the school sector. We are aware of that. That is why the Secretary of State has provided extra money for FE teachers' pay, but it has to be related to quality and we are working up proposals on that. There is more money; we are doing something about it.

Specialist Schools

10. **Jane Griffiths** (Reading, East): How many specialist schools have been created since May 1997. [132595]

12. **Valerie Davey** (Bristol, West): How many specialist schools have been created since May 1997. [132597]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Michael Wills): I too offer my congratulations to you, Mr. Speaker.

Since May 1997, the number of designated specialist schools has increased by 354. There are now 535 in operation, which puts us well on course to meet our new target to have 1,000 specialist schools by September 2004.

Jane Griffiths: May I also welcome you to your new position, Mr. Speaker?

I thank my hon. Friend for his reply, which will be welcomed in my constituency by the talented young people of Reading and Woodley, who have long awaited this expansion of specialist schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a clear demonstration that the Government do not only deliver what they promise, but, as regards the future of our children, they deliver far more than they promise?

Mr. Wills: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I do agree with her on that point. We have done much, because we realise the role that specialist schools can play in our drive to push up standards. That is why we are expanding them. There were 181 in 1997; at present, there are 535; and by 2004, there will be 1,000.

Valerie Davey: I, too, offer you congratulations, Mr. Speaker.

Cotham school in Bristol, West recently gained specialist performing arts status, thanks to an excellent bid that included collaboration with—among others—another secondary school, primary schools and a specialist school. Will my hon. Friend clarify how good practice in specialist schools is shared? Is there any evidence of benefits to other schools in an area?

Mr. Wills: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. The bid was indeed excellent; that is why it succeeded. We do not approve every bid; they each have to meet certain criteria, key among which is that they make a community contribution. A third of the budget must be spent on developing good practice in other schools and within the wider community. We have just heard of an example of that in Bristol.

There is another example in Reading where, last year, 200 adult trainees attended a 10-week evening course on computing at the Prospect school. That has obvious benefits for the wider community. In Reading, 28 primary schools, three secondary schools and one special school also benefited from the funding awarded to the Prospect school.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): St. Peter's school in my constituency is delighted to have received specialist status. I hope that George Abbot school will also receive favourable consideration from the Minister.

Why does the Minister not take the policy further by adopting the Conservative programme of free schools, which would give extra money to every school in the country? Our programme would allow each school to play to its specialist strength and would create the diversity in our maintained sector that parents evidently want.

Mr. Wills: The answer is quite simply because it would cause chaos. The hon. Gentleman has misunderstood the whole role of specialist schools. It is fundamental in driving up standards, which the Conservatives failed

to do, so there is absolutely no question of our adopting any Conservative policies from the past or the present—or, indeed, the future.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I welcome you, Mr. Speaker.

Does the Minister not realise the mayhem caused for eight local education authorities and many of their constituent schools by the sudden announcement, at the very end of last term, that their pupil numbers in specialist schools were to be capped at only 30 per cent? Ministers will be aware that two schools in my constituency—Kingsbrook and Chenderit—were particularly affected, although I hope that there is some light at the end of the tunnel for them.

Leaving aside that specific issue, will the Minister address the principle? Why does his Department seek—albeit only in certain cases—to ration the number of specialist schools? Would it not be more sensible to enable any school that wants to attain specialist status, and whose bid reaches the necessary quality standards, to do so?

Mr. Wills: I believe that the hon. Gentleman has been in correspondence with the Department and I hope that he received the reassurance he sought in respect of the school in Northamptonshire LEA.

On the question of principle, the measure is temporary and is not a rationing. Under the previous Government, specialist schools were rationed by funding. We have made funding available to expand the numbers dramatically from 181 to 1,000 by 2004. In 1997, the budget was £33 million, which we have more than doubled to over £75 million in this financial year. That is not rationing, but giving schools the resources to expand so they deliver for all our pupils.

The measure to which the hon. Gentleman refers is a temporary one for this phase of funding only and was introduced precisely because we want to ensure that every part of the country has equitable funding. *[Interruption.]* As usual, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) is muttering away to no good effect, and would do better to listen and learn how specialist schools can benefit the children of this country, which is something that her policies are signally failing to do.

Education Services (Leeds)

11. **Mr. Hilary Benn** (Leeds, Central): Who will take the decision as to whether the provision of education services in Leeds returns to the local education authority once the contract with the joint venture company ends. [132596]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): Leeds city council will be responsible for ensuring that services to schools are delivered on its behalf to an agreed specification through a contract with the proposed joint venture company. Towards the end of the contract, the Secretary of State and the council will need to reach a view on arrangements for the future delivery of services.

Mr. Benn: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, as we all want an effective and democratically accountable service within the city. Does she agree that the establishment of the new arrangements in Leeds would be greatly assisted if staff in the education department were to be seconded to the new partnership rather than have their employment transferred, with all the complexities that that would create, not least for their pensions?

Ms Morris: First, may I put on record my appreciation for the help that my hon. Friend has given in a difficult period for Leeds LEA. The key point is that we must keep our eye on what matters, which is that schools, governors and children in Leeds get better support than they have had in the past. Of course, we shall need to ensure that the new joint venture company, which will consist of Leeds city council and another partner, has the powers to direct and manage the staff who will raise standards. That will be central to our decision, but we also want to ensure that staff receive the protection to which they are legally entitled. The way in which those two things come together is under discussion at the moment, and I know that my hon. Friend would not want me to say anything today that would stop a proper decision being arrived at in, I hope, the near future.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Of course, as the Minister says, it is right that we focus on the needs of children in Leeds. However, we must be clear that outsourcing is necessary as the result both of a highly critical Ofsted report that showed local Labour councillors failing local children and of perceptions of political interference. Does the Minister accept that grabbing headlines by outsourcing services in Leeds and other LEAs such as Southwark and Sandwell while leaving Labour councillors in charge will fail local children? Is not the best thing for children in Leeds and other LEAs to set the schools free from the LEA, let heads, governors and teachers get on with providing children in Leeds with what they need to achieve rising standards in school and a good quality of education, and get rid of the political interference from Labour politicians?

Ms Morris: I am sure that the Conservative leader of Bradford city council, where we are also intervening, will be pleased to hear that a spokesperson down in Westminster has just done her out of a job.

The hon. Lady was unfair to the many local authorities in the north, the midlands and the south that have received outstanding reports from Ofsted. When run well, local authorities can be genuine partners that work with schools to raise standards. However, they cannot do that by themselves and the difference between this Government and the previous one is that we will act when local authorities fail to discharge their functions effectively. Many local authorities on which we are intervening were poor local authorities under the previous Government, who took no action. As a result, schools went without the local authority support that they needed.

The combination needed for high standards is good schools, schools managing themselves, heads with the ability and resources to manage schools, and good LEAs supporting them in that. We have made it clear that local authorities should be allowed to do their job when they do it well. However, when they do not, we will intervene, act and make sure that schools receive the support that they need.

Nursery Nurses

13. **Ms Julia Drown** (South Swindon): What steps the Government are taking to increase career opportunities for nursery nurses in education. [132598]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): May I warmly welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker?

We are working with local education authorities and relevant agencies to develop a training and qualifications framework for nursery nurses and other teaching assistants based on occupational standards and national vocational qualifications.

We are also working with the Early Years National Training Organisation to develop a route into higher education and training for those early-years practitioners, including nursery nurses, who wish to go down that road.

Ms Drown: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply, and I thank the Government for all the steps that they have taken to increase the amount of child care available in my constituency and to raise the status of child care workers. Will my hon. Friend consider any new proposals that are brought to her that would raise further the status of child care workers, especially in view of the contribution that nursery nurses make to raising numeracy and literacy standards and to giving special needs care throughout the country? Will she consider new proposals that would not limit so many nursery nurses to a salary of just £12,500?

Ms Hodge: I warmly endorse what my hon. Friend has said about the contribution that nursery nurses have made, as have other teaching assistants, to raising standards in our schools and nurseries. I am as anxious as she is to raise the status of early-years workers, including nursery nurses. That is why we have established a climbing frame of qualifications that enables nursery nurses, through employment-based training, to rise into other occupations in education, health or social work.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I, too, offer you my congratulations, Mr. Speaker.

I am interested in the Minister's reply. She will know that I recognise the work that the Government have done, in contrast to the previous Government's lack of action on child care and nursery education. However, does she understand the problem of a group of nursery teachers in my constituency who are doing a part-time higher education degree course, but who lose all their salary and sometimes their pension arrangements when they have to fulfil that part of their degree that requires full-time participation? Will she consider any funding or other scheme to allow those nursery teachers who are training part-time, but have to do full-time attachments, to continue their education?

Ms Hodge: We are certainly considering the matter and we are in discussion with higher education institutions to enable nursery nurses to undertake higher education via an employment-based route. If there are problems in nursery nurses doing that, I would warmly welcome the hon. Gentleman's writing to me. We will see whether we can tackle those problems.

Schools Special Grant

14. **Mr. David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): What range of amounts per pupil will result from the planned method of allocation for the increased special payments to head teachers announced in the spending review for *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools; and if he will make a statement. [132599]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): As there is no maximum size of school, it is not possible to give a precise range, but teachers in both the primary and secondary sector have welcomed the special grant that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced recently.

Mr. Taylor: The 44 primary schools in North-West Leicestershire give a warm welcome to the extra resources in the classroom to which my right hon. Friend has referred, but they are concerned about the sharp gearing in the system, which means that the loss of the 100th pupil can mean the loss of £6,000 of income. Will she undertake to review that aspect of the scheme and reassure Leicestershire Members of Parliament that our chronic underfunding of primary schools—£150 per pupil and £6 million in the county overall—will be addressed soon?

Ms Estelle Morris: I acknowledge that my hon. Friend has a record of speaking in the House in support of improved funding for Leicestershire. We will of course keep things under review, but we were keen to keep the special grant as simple as possible. It has been widely welcomed. It is additional money on top of that already directed through local authorities through the standard spending assessment and then through local management of schools to local schools. Primary and secondary schools welcome the assurance that they will have the money for the next two years, but, as ever, and as we did last year, we will certainly keep things under review.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): When revising the grant in future, will the Minister be prepared to accept an element of rurality in allocating the grant, so that the problems of sparsely populated rural areas are taken into account when devolving such a formula to schools?

Ms Morris: No, that is properly reflected in the standing spending assessment and that is where it should be reflected. This is a special grant that is given on top of SSA funding. It is sent directly to schools; it is not earmarked. It is additional to all the other resources that schools have received. We ought to keep the grant simple. I do not want to set up a bureaucratic formula about which we shall have to argue again. Let us consider the needs of rural schools, but let us keep them within the SSA framework and let us keep the special grant as simple as possible and get it into schools with the minimum of bureaucracy.

BSE Inquiry Report

12.30 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the report of the BSE inquiry, chaired by Lord Phillips of Worth Matravers.

Today, the Government are publishing the report, and I want to announce our initial response and to outline a package of measures for the benefit of people suffering from variant CJD and their families, as well as the families of people who have already died of the disease. This is not, however, the occasion to announce the Government's substantive response to the inquiry's report. That will come later.

I should like to express the Government's thanks to Lord Phillips, Mrs. June Bridgeman and Professor Malcolm Ferguson-Smith for their thorough inquiry, which has occupied them for the best part of the past three years.

As the Government recognised when setting up the inquiry, BSE is a national tragedy. To date, 85 definite or probable cases of variant CJD have been reported in the United Kingdom. Of those 85, 80 people have died. An unknown number of cases are yet to come. It is not possible to give precise forecasts because of the many uncertainties about the disease. I know that the whole House will join me in expressing deepest sympathy to those who have fallen victim to variant CJD, and to their families.

BSE has also had a serious impact on many tens of thousands of people whose livelihoods depend on the rearing of livestock and the processing and manufacturing of meat products.

The inquiry was set up by my right hon. Friends the Members for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) and for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) and the then Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland. Its remit was to establish and review the history of the emergence and identification of BSE and new variant CJD and to reach conclusions on the adequacy of the response, taking into account the state of knowledge at that time. The inquiry report comprises 16 volumes and some 4,000 pages. Volume 1 sets out the key findings and conclusions.

I shall quote directly from the report's executive summary. The key conclusions are:

BSE developed into an epidemic as a consequence of an intensive farming practice—the recycling of animal protein in ruminant feed. This practice, unchallenged over decades, proved a recipe for disaster.

In the years up to March 1996 most of those responsible for responding to the challenge posed by BSE emerge with credit. However, there were a number of shortcomings in the way things were done.

At the heart of the BSE story lie questions of how to handle hazard—a known hazard to cattle and an unknown hazard to humans. The Government took measures to address both hazards. They were sensible measures, but they were not always timely nor adequately implemented and enforced.

The rigour with which policy measures were implemented for the protection of human heath was affected by the belief of many prior to early 1996 that BSE was not a potential threat to human life.

The Government was anxious to act in the best interests of human and animal health. To this end it sought and followed the advice of independent scientific experts—sometimes when decisions could have been reached more swiftly and satisfactorily within government.

In dealing with BSE, it was not MAFF's policy to lean in favour of the agricultural producers to the detriment of the consumer.

At times officials showed a lack of rigour in considering how policy should be turned into practice, to the detriment of the efficacy of the measures taken.

At times bureaucratic processes resulted in unacceptable delay in giving effect to policy.

The Government introduced measures to guard against the risk that BSE might be a matter of life and death not merely for cattle but also for humans, but the possibility of a risk to humans was not communicated to the public or to those whose job it was to implement and enforce the precautionary measures.

The Government did not lie to the public about BSE. It believed that the risks posed by BSE to humans were remote. The Government was preoccupied with preventing an alarmist over-reaction to BSE because it believed that the risk was remote. It is now clear that this campaign of reassurance was a mistake. When on 20 March 1996 the Government announced that BSE had probably been transmitted to humans, the public felt that they had been betrayed. Confidence in government pronouncements about risk was a further casualty of BSE.

Cases of a new variant of CJD (vCJD) were identified by the CJD Surveillance Unit and the conclusion that they were probably linked to BSE was reached as early as was reasonably possible. The link between BSE and vCJD is now clearly established, though the manner of infection is not clear.

Those are direct quotations from Lord Phillips's executive summary.

The Government welcome the report. We will be studying its findings with care and looking closely at the lessons that flow from them. It is right that the House, and the wider public, should have the opportunity to do so. They are important findings and they address some fundamental questions about the adequacy of the response to BSE.

The report contains many lessons for public administration. We will be focusing our response on areas including the implementation of policy decisions; the process of contingency planning; co-ordination across Departments and other agencies; the assessment, management and communication of risk; the role of scientific advisory committees; and the Government's assessment and use of scientific advice.

Even now, there are some unresolved questions about BSE. We do not know with certainty how the disease entered the cattle herd, or why it has been so predominantly a disease affecting this country. Lord Phillips's conclusion is that the origin of BSE is likely to have been a new prion mutation in cattle, or possibly sheep, in the early 1970s. In the light of that conclusion, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and I will be commissioning an independent assessment of current scientific understanding, including emerging findings, of the origins of the BSE epidemic. That study will then be considered by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, and published.

Although it was beyond the remit of the inquiry to examine current public protection measures, I know that the House will want to know that the chairman of the Food Standards Agency advises that the report gives rise to no immediate need for new food safety measures. He intends to discuss that aspect of the report at the next public meeting of the agency's on-going review of BSE controls.

Both the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee and the Food Standards Agency board propose to review relevant elements of the report. We will take

account of any conclusions or advice that they wish to offer in the Government's response to the report. The same applies to Select Committees.

The Government will announce their substantive response to the report in the coming months. Following that announcement, the House will have an early opportunity to debate in Government time both the report and the Government's response. However, there is one element in the report that the Government are singling out for attention now: the care of patients suffering from variant CJD and support for the families caring for them.

The needs of variant CJD victims were frequently insufficiently addressed, especially in the early days of the disease. The rapidly degenerative nature of variant CJD requires timely and accurate diagnosis and a swift response from local health and social services departments. Patient care has been variable in the past and not always responsive enough to the rapidly changing needs of patients.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health issued new guidelines in August to improve the care of variant CJD victims. The Government now intend to go further.

I can tell the House that, given the special circumstances of those patients, my right hon. Friend will establish a new national fund for the care of victims of variant CJD. The fund will ensure a speedy response to diagnosis and improvements in the quality of care for patients. This package will be co-ordinated through the national CJD surveillance unit in Edinburgh.

The new national care fund will be used to purchase care and equipment appropriate to the individual needs of variant CJD patients. The fund will be held by the CJD surveillance unit care co-ordinator, supported by a new national network of experts available to support local clinicians and local social services caring for patients wherever they live.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health met families of variant CJD victims and representatives of the Human BSE Foundation yesterday to discuss the new package of care. Over the next few weeks, his Department will be working with the families affected to refine the package to ensure that it is effective and properly meets the needs of patients.

This dreadful disease has a devastating effect on victims and their families. The families have campaigned for improved diagnosis and care for those who may yet be affected by this national tragedy. I am sure that the House will want to acknowledge the dignified and constructive way in which they have done so.

In addition to the enhanced care package, we are determined to provide appropriate support for those who are suffering from variant CJD, for those who care for them, and for the families of those who have already died.

The Government therefore intend to put in place financial arrangements to benefit sufferers from variant CJD, and their families, taking account of their particular needs in individual cases.

The Government's preferred option would be to establish a compensation scheme, resulting in a special trust fund, which could amount to millions of pounds. There are a number of possible options. We intend to work closely with the families affected to identify the best way forward. The first discussions with the families and their representatives will take place next week.

The Government want to express their appreciation for the co-operation of all witnesses who have been called before the inquiry. Although the inquiry team states that—this is a direct quote—

> any who have come to our Report hoping to find villains or scapegoats, should go away disappointed,

the report does make a number of specific criticisms of a number of individuals.

I shall not comment on individual cases. The report contains an annexe listing those who are criticised. Some of the individuals who are criticised also receive praise from the inquiry, but there is no corresponding list of individuals who are praised. Elsewhere, the report identifies shortcomings that do not amount to criticisms, and therefore do not feature in the annexe. For both these reasons, it is important that the report is considered in its entirety.

Whenever serving public servants are subjected to criticism by a public inquiry, the question arises whether any form of disciplinary action should be taken. The report states:

> If those criticised were misguided, they were nonetheless acting in accordance with what they conceived to be the proper performance of their duties.

However, mindful of the importance of the issues covered by the inquiry, an independent person, Sheila Forbes, a civil service commissioner, will lead a review and advise accordingly. The Government want the review to be carried out quickly, across the Departments involved.

The devolved Administrations also received the report and will respond for their interests.

Hon. Members will also wish to know that I am today sending copies of the report to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Governments of each European Union member state. In addition, I have arranged for the report to be placed on the internet, accessible via the MAFF website.

On taking office in 1997, this Government put consumers at the heart of decision making on food safety issues. We have established the independent Food Standards Agency. We have opened up our scientific advisory committees, including the appointment of consumer representatives. We put scientific advice to Government in the public domain, encouraging a culture of openness, trusting the public and stimulating informed public debate. The "deregulation culture" that called for a "bonfire of regulations" has been replaced by a proportionate approach that strives for better regulation, with the protection of the public at its heart. We have put in place working arrangements to encourage the sharing of ideas and information between Government Departments and other agencies.

The inquiry has made a very thorough assessment of the history of BSE and of the response of the Government of the day. It has added greatly to our understanding of this detailed and complex area. Work is already under way across the whole of government to follow up on the inquiry's findings. Most importantly, today, we are setting in hand improved packages of care and arrangements for financial support for victims of variant CJD and their families. I commend the inquiry's report to the House.

12.46 pm

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): We welcome the publication of the report. We congratulate Lord Phillips and his team on producing a comprehensive document. I had my first chance to see it earlier this morning. Although I have had less than two hours to study the document, which runs to 16 volumes and which took more than two years to prepare, what I have seen is clear, comprehensive and, so far as I can judge, fair.

I welcome the Minister's statement, and I agree with much of it. I especially agree with his view that the report should be considered in its entirety. I believe that the report makes it clear that civil servants, other advisers and Ministers acted honourably and in good faith. I agree with the report that we must avoid judging individuals with the benefit of hindsight. Nevertheless, I recognise that mistakes were made, some of which had tragic consequences.

I accept the criticisms that are made in the report. I draw attention, as the Minister has done, to a section of paragraph 1292, which reads:

> Although we have made a number of individual criticisms in respect of risk communication, the lessons to be learned are based on hindsight and relate to the overall approach of reassurance that was adopted. We do not consider that individuals should be criticised for following that approach.

However, I am truly sorry for what has happened. I apologise to the families that have suffered bereavement and to those people who are still fighting a terrible illness.

Until I have studied the report more carefully, it would be wrong to try to comment on all its conclusions. Our task now is to find ways of minimising and alleviating the suffering and distress of victims of variant CJD and of their families. Secondly, we must identify and take all steps possible to reduce the risk of any similar crisis occurring in future.

I welcome the Government's decision to arrange compensation. I am sure that the Minister will give details of that as soon as he is able to do so. Does the Minister believe that Lord Phillips's conclusions have any implications for responsibilities now exercised by civil servants who may still be in post? Does he agree that one of the strongest messages from the report is about inadequate co-ordination between Government Departments, and sometimes inadequate communication between different branches of government? Does he believe that there are lessons to be learned, even now, about how relations between Whitehall Departments could be improved and about how the process of making decisions based on scientific advice could be made more transparent?

Will the Minister confirm that the report states that changes in rendering methods did not cause BSE? Is he satisfied that civil servants who may be worried about whether their advice is being wrongly ignored have the right channels for raising their concerns? Does he believe that the scientific advice given to Ministers should more frequently be made available to the public as well? When will the Government be giving their definitive response to the report? Finally, I assure the House that the Opposition are as keen as anybody else to ensure that the full lessons of the report and of the entire tragic episode are properly learned. I hope that there will a full debate as soon as possible.

Mr. Brown: I assure the hon. Gentleman that there will be a full debate in the House as soon as possible. Discussions about that and the response will be held through the usual channels.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for the tone of his response, for the welcome that he has given to Lord Phillips's report and for his congratulations to Lord Phillips. We shall not give the Government's full response now; we need time. There are approximately 167 different recommendations, which require a considered response and we want to think carefully about everything that Lord Phillips has said.

The hon. Gentleman acknowledges that mistakes were made. He is right to say that, with the benefit of hindsight, we can understand things that might not have been clear at the time when they were happening, but we must all learn the lessons, and that is why the report is so helpful. He has said that he is sorry for what has happened and I should like to identify the whole House with that expression of sorrow: our hearts go out to the victims, their friends and families and others who grieve for them.

The hon. Gentleman has welcomed our enhanced care package and the compensation element that goes with it. He is correct to assume that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will want to say more as discussions with the families and their representatives continue.

Serving members of the civil service have, of course, been isolated from BSE inquiry work since the establishment of the inquiry. It is right that the report's findings in relation to serving civil servants be reviewed, but it is for a civil service commissioner to do that, not for politicians. That is the constitutionally correct course of action and, whatever reservations hon. Members might have about it, I urge them to think about the alternatives; I think that they will find that they are worse.

On communication, a great deal has been done within Government to make sure that Departments talk to each other and agencies talk to the Departments with which they are supposed to work, but, as I said, that issue will form part of the Government's review. The use of science is certainly a topic that the Government will review and on which they will report back to the House. It raises some difficult questions, which is another reason for not responding immediately, but thinking about it carefully.

I confirm that the hon. Gentleman's reading of Lord Phillips's findings in respect of rendering methods is correct. Although Lord Phillips's findings on the change from batch production to throughput and his analysis of changes involving the use of solvents might come as a surprise to those coming fresh to the subject, they are clear.

As for civil servants' advice to Ministers, I make it clear to my civil servants that I should greatly prefer that they told me what they actually think, rather than what they want me to hear. I do not mind people being combative and disagreeing with me; what I find difficult is people not stating what they believe to be the truth. That is the approach taken by most responsible Ministers.

On the question of the science that is available to the Government, we have made it a matter of policy to put such information in the public domain wherever possible,

by which I mean placing it on the MAFF website and making it available to Members of Parliament via the Library.

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): Like every other hon. Member, I have not yet had an opportunity to study the many volumes of the report, but, from what I have read in the past few hours, it is clear that it is an impressive and objective report. We all owe our thanks to Lord Phillips and his colleagues for the way in which they conducted their inquiry. The Government were right to set up the inquiry and the House will be right to consider its report soberly and to take appropriate action.

All of us, as we read the report, must accept our responsibility for shortcomings and the problems that arose from them. BSE and its transmission to CJD has been a dreadful and scarring experience—above all, of course, for the victims of that terrible disease and their families, who must have suffered an agony of mind and body that we can barely begin to imagine. It has also, for different and lesser reasons, been a huge problem for the beef industry, and for the officials and Ministers who sought to deal with the problem, which, as the Minister honestly made clear today, even today remains at the frontiers of our knowledge.

Will the Minister confirm that many of the people who face individual criticisms in the annexe to the report are precisely the same people who are praised elsewhere in the report for other actions and are, by definition, those—officials predominantly, but also several Ministers—who were most active in challenging BSE, and, therefore, in the position of having to take difficult decisions? I am grateful to the Minister, on behalf of those officials and Ministers, for expressing, as the report does, that no "villains or scapegoats" emerge from the report.

Does the Minister recall that, even though it was believed, and passionately believed, on advice, by those dealing with it, that there was no threat to human life, more than 30 pieces of legislation were presented to the House and passed by the House to protect against the spread of BSE? Lord Phillips's balanced report emphasises that some mistakes were made, and emphasises also, in fairness, that they were not due to indolence but, in many cases, where they occurred, were due to overwhelming pressure on a few key officials who had particular knowledge in dealing with this. That is a point that I hope will be borne in mind when those officials face any possible disciplinary action in future.

Will the Minister confirm also that it has invariably been the case that those officials and Ministers accepted the advice of the Government's advisory body as, if I may quote the Prime Minister on genetically modified foods—I strongly agree with what he said—

> any responsible Government would have to do?

This is a balanced report and I hope that it will help the House to focus on the lessons to be learned. That remains important for, as we have seen in the past few days on matters related to vaccines, BSE remains an appallingly difficult problem with which to deal. It was for the previous Government and it remains, in some respects, for the present Government and the Ministers and officials who must still deal with it.

Will the Minister endeavour to ensure that the provisions of the compensation scheme, which I strongly welcome, are enacted as speedily and fairly as he can arrange? Finally, I thank him for his promise that the Leader of the House will arrange a debate. Can we ensure that, within that debate, there is a proper opportunity to consider in detail the recommendations made by Lord Phillips so that the report does not gather dust but is an active and living document to ensure that such a tragedy does not occur again?

Mr. Brown: We need to learn the lessons from this. I give the right hon. Gentleman an absolute pledge that the report will not gather dust. Every single one of the recommendations that Lord Phillips makes to the Government is worthy of a response and should have a measured response, and that response should be subjected to the usual tests that we apply in this place, including robust debate, but the time for that response is not now. People want an opportunity to read the report, and I urge hon. Members to read it in its entirety rather than try to extrapolate its findings from extracts.

I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his welcome for our care package. He is right to make the point that, when dealing with science, the best possible way to ensure that it is dealt with properly within government is to put the information into the public domain at the same time, and the Government now do that.

The right hon. Gentleman is also right to draw the attention of the House to the substantial amount of secondary legislation that went through this place as the Government struggled to find a proportionate response to the emerging challenges of BSE. The report clearly draws to our attention the difficulties not just in getting the legislation through and making sure that the response was proportionate, but in ensuring that it was being implemented on the ground. There were major shortcomings in that area, as Lord Phillips says.

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I loathe scapegoating and will not tolerate it. There are individual criticisms, but as I said in my opening statement, more than half of those who are individually criticised are also praised and in one or two cases—I shall not make specific reference to individuals—substantially praised, because the action that they took was both timely and would have resulted in the saving of lives. It is necessary that the report is considered in the round and that people do not pick out the parts that suit their point of view.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): It is a pleasure to be called by you personally, Mr. Speaker, albeit on a sad occasion.

Does my right hon. Friend know that my late constituent, young Donnamaria McGivern, died as a teenager after two and a half years of traumatic experience? When I spoke to her mother this morning, she was not bitter. Indeed, she welcomed what we understood to be the Government's thinking, which my right hon. Friend has confirmed, on compensation. She was thinking of others, and the need for care packages. The openness that my right hon. Friend has introduced is apparent in the culture change in the Food Standards Agency. However, in welcoming that, my constituent's mother took the view, as I do, that it is important to continue to consult and involve the families when

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implementing the responses. I ask my right hon. Friend to take that on board, and assure him that, if he does, he will have a great deal of support.

Mr. Brown: I thank my right hon. Friend for those thoroughly decent remarks. I am sure that the House shares his concern about the care package and the compensation arrangements that are being put in place for the victims of CJD and their families.

Both elements of today's announcement—care and compensation—will be developed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health in consultation with those who represent the families and the victims. That is the Government's firm intention.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I thank the Minister for giving me an early opportunity to consider the report. It reveals a sorry saga of complacency in the early years, incompetence when risks were emerging and complicity when matters started to go wrong. It betrays a culture of Whitehall secrecy and interdepartmental failure to communicate, which, when combined with party political expediency, results in a betrayal of the public and their interests.

Our thanks and gratitude must go to Lord Phillips and his team for producing such an extensive, excellent and balanced report, although reading 4,000 pages in two hours is a little difficult. Our hearts go out to all affected by the tragedy: those who are directly affected and their families.

I accept that criticism and blame of individuals must be tempered because we are considering these matters with the benefit of hindsight. That is an exact science. Lessons must be learned, and action taken promptly. Governments must learn to trust the public. By doing that, they will engender a reciprocal trust from the public.

While I am pleased that we shall have an early opportunity to discuss the full report, one of the criticisms was about timely action. Can we be certain that the report's recommendations will provide an opportunity for genuine, prompt action in a short time scale so that the precautionary principle, the need for which has been so clearly demonstrated, will apply?

Does the Minister believe that the arrangements for the regulation and reporting of the Food Standards Agency comply with all the report's recommendations? With specific regard to the reporting structures, does the Minister believe that it would be right for the Food Standards Agency to report directly to the House rather than to a Department?

Does the Minister agree that, as a matter of urgency, we must have a robust Freedom of Information Act, which would be a vital element in restoring and retaining public confidence in the Government and all their future pronouncements?

Mr. Brown: Trust is at the heart of this matter. That is why the Government have created a culture of openness and why we put the advice to Government—including the scientific advice—into the public domain. The Food Standards Agency is intended to be an independent agency and a non-ministerial Department, but it does report to the House, through the Secretary of State for Health and not through me. I think that the current structure is right. However, as I said in my statement, the chair of the FSA intends to review the Phillips report—or at least the parts that pertain to his responsibilities—at his next public meeting. One cannot be more open than that.

The hon. Gentleman refers to complacency, incompetence and complicity. As I said in my statement, I will not make the Government's response now, since Lord Phillips's recommendations—of which there are 167—deserve reflection. The report deserves to be discussed in the public domain and then the Government should respond, with our response conditioned by the views of others. However, the charge of complicity is a serious one and should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman could set out the precise points where he thinks the Phillips report justifies that very serious charge.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The House will realise that many hon. Members wish to ask a question. I ask hon. Members to be brief; it will help their colleagues.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Like many others in the House, the tragedy of CJD touched me directly when, in 1998, a young neighbour of mine died. I congratulate the Government on the package of care and compensation, but my question is this. In 1989, the Southwood report recommended to the Cabinet that offal be banned in the use of baby food, yet I understand that no Cabinet Minister asked the question, "If offal is unfit for babies, why is it safe for adults?" If that question had been asked, might my young neighbour be alive today?

Mr. Brown: One of the great tragedies of this matter is that it is not possible to answer the second part of my hon. Friend's question. However, on the question of why precautionary measures should be put in place for baby food but not for food eaten by adults, Lord Phillips had some strong things to say. Now is not the right moment for me to respond, but my hon. Friend is on to what Lord Phillips believes to be a strong point.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I very much welcome the report, which is manifestly an important document. There is no doubt that there are many lessons, both public and private, to be learned. I echo the words of the Minister when he says that this is a tragedy. I fully recognise what a tragedy it is for the victims and their families and I am deeply sorry for their suffering. I am deeply sorry also for many in agriculture who have suffered grave loss. In respect of the officials who advised myself and others, we believed that they gave their advice in good faith and very much to the best of their professional ability.

Speaking a little more directly about myself, does the Minister accept that I welcome the findings explicitly made at paragraphs 467 and 487 that the regime that I put in place as to the control of abattoirs in 1995 was effective in content and fully and effectively monitored? Will he confirm to the House the finding at paragraph 7.483 of volume 6 that the recommendations that I made in March 1996 as to how to address the crisis were "the right answers", were implemented by Government and—subject to natural evolution—remain the basis of Government policy today?

Mr. Brown: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his welcome for the report, his expression

of sorrow and his acknowledgment—shared by everyone in the House—that this has been a national tragedy. I said that I did not want to comment on the findings of the report in respect of individuals. I can confirm that his points are right, but they are not the only findings in respect of the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I again urge every hon. Member to read the full report. The right hon. and learned Gentleman had very important responsibilities. There are findings that speak well for him but the report also contains criticisms of him. The picture needs to be taken in the round.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I begin by expressing my appreciation of the quality of the statement that my right hon. Friend has made. This is a complex subject that needs to be considered with proper reflection, and I admire the way in which the Government have deliberately responded first to the issue of urgency while setting aside time in the future for the public and ordinary Members of Parliament to comment on other matters in the report. It would have been easy to rush to judgment and make partisan points, and I admire the fact that my right hon. Friend has refrained from doing that.

My right hon. Friend may want to consider two matters. The first is the adequacy of the research base supporting agriculture. Some of my right hon. Friend's remarks about the genesis of the problem may relate to the appropriateness of the research resource and its targeting in the past, and this is an opportunity to reflect on whether we now have the balance right. The second matter concerns whether we have a culture in our public service that occasionally dwells more on process and less on outcome. I suspect that one of the difficulties that the report may reveal is that decisions are made but not enough attention is given to the delivery of the outcome that is sought in those decisions.

Mr. Brown: Both of those points are well made. Lord Phillips has something to say about the implementation of Government decisions, and it is clear that a part of the tragedy was a failure, not to put a proper regime of public protection in place, but to ensure that it was implemented—the outcome on which my hon. Friend focuses. Lord Phillips sets out a range of reasons for that. I do not want to respond now, but I urge right hon. and hon. Members to consider that part of the report.

On the research base, my hon. Friend will be aware that the budget is held across Departments. There has been a substantial shift in research expenditure towards transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, and that is right, but clearly we will want to review research and priorities in this area in the light of what Lord Phillips has to say.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The Minister has, understandably, sent copies of the report to the European Commission and our Community partners. Does he envisage taking any steps to ensure that a balanced and proper debate on the findings takes place among our partners and the Commission?

Mr. Brown: The report has been sent to our partners in the European Union in order to be completely open and candid with the Commission and the individual member states. In my time as a Minister, I have found that to be the best approach to adopt. I hope that the report will enable others to learn the lessons that we have so painfully learned and prevent such tragedies from happening elsewhere. If it can do that, that will be an extra good thing.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I have a 21-year-old constituent, Donna McIntyre, who is a suspected victim of new variant CJD. Obviously, no words that I can use can adequately express that tragedy, but may I say on behalf of Donna and those who care for her that I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement? Am I correct in understanding from it that suspected sufferers from the disease will be provided with the fullest possible care and that they and their families are guaranteed compensation?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right to raise the case of his constituent. I express the sorrow of the whole House for his constituent and her friends and relatives. My hon. Friend is right in his understanding that there are two components to what we are announcing today: the enhanced care package, the exact nature of which is already the subject of discussions with those representing the interests of the patients and their carers; and the compensation element, discussions about which will proceed with those representatives next week. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is determined to act expeditiously.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): With all the awful difficulty and tragedy associated with this matter, is it not still the case that, even after 15 years, we remain unsure about the origins of BSE? Are we to understand from the Minister's statement that the research effort is to be enhanced? If so, will he ensure that it takes into account the widest possible range of view and study, as it is urgent that we identify the cause of the disease?

Mr. Brown: That is a very important point. There is no absolute certainty about the true origin of BSE, although we know more about it than we did in the mid-1980s, let alone the 1970s. The findings in Lord Phillips's report make very interesting reading. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and I have asked for a comprehensive review of everything that is known at present. That review will also include emerging science, so that we will have an understanding of the current state of knowledge and of what remains to be discovered, as we still do not know the whole story.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the main lessons to be learned from this chapter is the importance of the precautionary principle? There was always a danger that BSE was transmissible to humans, but, for more than a decade, we lived with the myth that somehow we would be immune to it. That myth persisted even after it was shown that the disease could be transmitted to laboratory animals and cats.

In opposition, when my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) and I, among others, raised such questions, we were accused of scaremongering. It has turned out that there will be dozens, or even hundreds, of human casualties. Will my right hon. Friend reassure

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me that the precautionary principle will remain paramount in the work done by him and this Government on food safety?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right in what he says about the precautionary principle. He is also correct in saying that Lord Phillips's report has a substantial amount to tell us about the emerging view in the scientific community that BSE can jump the species barrier. Steps on the journey towards that understanding include the findings of the Southwood report, and laboratory experimentation with a pig. That experimentation showed that a pig could acquire the condition when the disease was injected into its brain. There was also the discovery that a feline spongiform encephalopathy existed, which showed that the species barrier had been jumped and that the condition—or something very like it—was prevalent in cats.

The scientific view started to change, and Phillips has something to say about how quickly that changing scientific view was transmitted and acted on within government. However, I do not want to respond on that matter now: hon. Members really should read the report in its entirety.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Whatever the motives of those who withheld from the public information about the risks associated with BSE, does the Minister accept that the consequences of that action were absolutely devastating to all the interests that they may have thought they were protecting? My constituency was completely devastated by the introduction of the scheme to cull cows and the collapse of the beef market.

First, given the long incubation period of new variant CJD, what measures will be taken to step up research to find ways to prevent, treat and cure the disease? Successful research in that direction would mean that we would be able to deal with a significant rise in the numbers of people affected by it.

Secondly, will the Minister accept the strictures of my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), that the history of the disease justifies a much more open freedom of information regime?

Thirdly, the Government have put in place measures to protect people in this country from BSE, but there has been a rise in the incidence of CJD in France. How will the Minister ensure that there is no danger of the disease reaching us by way of imported products?

Mr. Brown: The setting up of the Food Standards Agency is a key public protection measure. Responsibility for food safety is not now a matter for me, as a Minister, or for my Ministry. That is the whole point of setting up an independent agency. The hon. Gentleman should look to Sir John Krebs for statements about the safety of food products from France or elsewhere.

As for candour, I endeavour to put scientific advice to Ministers—and, indeed, other advice—in the public domain. On a number of occasions, I have also placed such advice in the Library, so that, on controversial topics, all Members of the House can see what advice has been given.

Lord Phillips clearly identifies a failure to communicate. The Government have done a great deal to address that concern, from the election onwards. We want to trust the public; we want to be candid. The advisory committees, whose lay representation includes consumers, put their advice into the public domain. In addition, of course, the Food Standards Agency meets in public and puts its advice to Ministers into the public domain at the same time. Those are some of the measures that the Government have already taken to address some of the points that have arisen in the process of the Phillips inquiry.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned motives. I know that I have said this before, but I urge him to read the report in its entirety before rushing to judgment. I accept that he has not seen it, but he really should read it. It deserves a period of mature consideration before we make subjective value judgments.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): One of the first constituents to visit my surgery after my election was Shirley Warne, who was desperate to find out why her son Chris was lying in hospital dying from this dreadful disease. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, if we do not learn fully all the lessons about openness and getting rid of any culture of secrecy, it will be a betrayal of the families who have suffered so much?

I welcome the fact that families will not have to struggle through the courts to get the compensation that they need and the package of care that is required. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that package will be sufficiently generous to meet those needs and fully to help those people who are struggling to care for their loved ones at home?

Mr. Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for her welcome for the care package and the compensation package. It has not been finally decided whether the trust structure is the right vehicle for delivering these measures. That will be the subject of discussions between my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and those representing the families' interests. However, I am grateful that my hon. Friend welcomes this as an important new announcement and a step forward for the families concerned.

My hon. Friend spoke about secrecy. It is clearly right—certainly with the advantage of hindsight—to trust the public, put the advice available to the Government into the public domain and encourage a responsible debate around scientific advice. The previous Government did not wish to cause alarm, and were therefore not open about these matters because they feared causing a panic. They believed that the countervailing arguments were stronger. Lord Phillips's finding is very clear on this, as I said in my statement: he says that it was a mistake. He does not say that it was necessarily unreasonable at the time, which is why I urge people to read the report in its entirety.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Until the last election's boundary changes, the village of Queniborough was in my constituency. A cluster of CJD cases has been found there, as yet unexplained. Two years ago, I tabled a series of parliamentary questions seeking information about the risk of passing on the disease through the re-use of medical instruments which, it seems, cannot be adequately sterilised by conventional methods. What does

the report conclude about that risk? Given that it was known about some time ago, what have the Government done so far and, given what I suspect is a continuing urgency, what will they do further to eliminate the risk?

Mr. Brown: As I say, I do not want to give the Government's response now. Lord Phillips's report is comprehensive and he deals in a measured and thorough way with the routes of transmission. He looks at cosmetics, medical instruments and vaccines. It is a pretty thorough survey of all the possible routes of transmission and I urge the hon. Gentleman to look at those passages in the report if he can do no more. He is right about the cluster, which is still unexplained. It is unlikely that it was merely a statistical fluke, but no cause has yet been identified, although as he will know as a result of representing the area, a substantial amount of work is going on.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there will be widespread support for his announcement that all the individuals and families who have suffered as a result of new variant CJD will receive compensation? In view of the lengthy incubation period of the disease in humans, I am sure that we are right not to predict the likely total number of cases. Does he agree that, with 85 people known to have contracted the disease, 18 of whom have done so this year, a significant epidemic is still a possibility and that we need to be prepared for that?

Of course, we will need to read the report thoroughly. Can my right hon. Friend comment on the suggestion that the inadequacy of the research done during the 1980s may have resulted in the disaster being greater than it need have been? Some of the reasons for that may have been a lack of transparency, massive cuts in the number of Government scientists working in the area throughout the 1980s and, against that background, an insistence by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food that the research be carried out in its establishments rather than in the public sector establishments best fitted to do the work.

Mr. Brown: In preparing for this debate, I re-read what my right hon. Friend said in 1996 when he was Opposition spokesman on agriculture—it reads very well in the light of what happened. My right hon. Friend certainly represented his party well. On the incubation period, he is right that, we do not know even the average incubation period of the prion protein agent in humans, so one cannot extrapolate from the statistical trends the eventual epidemic. I look forward to the day when the number of victims year on year will go steadily down, as I am sure everyone does, because that will tell us that we are through this. Until we get there, it is rash to predict.

On research, there has now been a substantial shift in expenditure towards research into transmissible spongiform encephalopathies. Lord Phillips has something to say about which research institutions were used and whether a single director should have been appointed to oversee all BSE-CJD research. I do not want to paraphrase Lord Phillips because the finding is detailed, but I commend it to my right hon. Friend.

As for shortcomings, Lord Phillips has a lot to say on the implementation of the controls. Even where the scientific advice to Ministers—advice from professional civil servants—was timely and right, its translation into effective action is much criticised in the report.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I welcome the Minister's statement. From what we have heard, the report is excellent as well as being fair and balanced. The BSE saga teaches us a salutary lesson. Despite the extent of our knowledge, we can suddenly be hit by a new disease that plays havoc with society, and that should humble us all. I welcome the enhanced care package because I know how tragic it is to see a young person cut down. These patients' parents have to watch them for a long time dying. That package is useful. On compensation, does this mean that the Government are reasonably sure that there will not be a large number of cases? Have we reached that stage yet?

Mr. Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his characteristically humane remarks about the victims of CJD and those who have to watch members of their family—usually the younger members—suffering in the most appalling circumstances. His views are echoed all around the House.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the package, which has two components: an enhanced care element and a compensation element. He is right to say that the Government have taken the difficult decision to put those arrangements in place regardless of the eventual outcome of the number of people who need to be cared for. They are our fellow citizens, and we shall have to care for them anyway—every Member would want to do so.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): It is impossible to underestimate the tragedy for all the victims and their families, but a separate tragedy has affected the livestock industry. It is estimated that the Government have so far spent about £4 billion on anti-BSE measures, but that does not take account of the impact on the different communities in agricultural areas. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the Government will continue to spend whatever it takes to eradicate BSE and to ensure that we learn from the mistakes that were made in the past so that we rebuild our livestock industry?

Mr. Brown: Just after the period covered by the Phillips report, and in response to the climate of opinion at the time, the Government introduced the over-30-months scheme, which is by far the most expensive part of our public protection measures and provides a floor in the market—indeed, the only market—for older animals. It is a market intervention measure, but its purpose is not market intervention; it exists to protect the public. It does so powerfully, and it will stay so long as it is needed to carry out that function. Who takes the decision on that? It is now a matter for the Food Standards Agency, which is leading a review of the measures now in place to protect the public from variant CJD. Everything that is recommended will be in the public domain so that we can all see what is recommended and why.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): An eminent scientist who is a constituent of mine is within a shade of initiating a diagnostic test for BSE. He is being hampered in his research by the fact that the Ministry will not allow access to infected cattle. Earlier this week, I tabled several parliamentary questions on that subject. May I ask the Minister please to consider them personally and reverse the Ministry's stance, which is hampering that vital research?

Mr. Brown: There are a number of theories and, from them, attempts to discover diagnostic tests for BSE and

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variant CJD. It would be overwhelmingly beneficial if a diagnostic test could be found that worked on cattle and went back before the onset of the clinical signs. Such work is being undertaken, but access to the necessary research material must be limited; there is only a limited amount of it and it is mostly held by the Government. How that vital research tool is to be used is very much a matter on which I would want to be professionally advised.

I promise to have the hon. Gentleman's constituency point looked at, but I cannot promise to intervene as the political head of a Department and alter the decisions, which are based on scientific judgment rather than political decision making.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Unfortunately, we now have to move on to the business statement.

Business of the House

1.34 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 30 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]*.

TUESDAY 31 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Children (Leaving Care) Bill *[Lords]*.

WEDNESDAY 1 NOVEMBER—Debate on Defence and the Armed Forces on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

THURSDAY 2 NOVEMBER—Continuation of debate on Defence and the Armed Forces on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 3 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

MONDAY 6 NOVEMBER—Opposition Day [19th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Liberal Democrats. Subject to be announced.

The House will also wish to know that on Wednesday 1 November there will be a debate on European Document No:9964/00: Social Policy Agenda, in European Standing Committee C. Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

[Wednesday 1 November 2000:

European Standing Committee C—Relevant European Union Document: 9964/00, Social Policy Agenda; Relevant European Scrutiny Committee Report: HC 23-xxvi (1999-2000).]

The House may also wish to know that the new Session will be opened on Wednesday 6 December.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business for next week. Before asking for details, I pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who discharged his duties as shadow Leader of the House with grace and charm. He had a constructive working relationship with the Government, which helped to enhance the way in which the House is run.

The right hon. Lady kindly gave us a date for the Queen's Speech, but will she tell us when it was last held in December? She will be aware that its lateness is a reflection of the backlog from this Session. Many of us are concerned about the way in which the House's business is being discharged during the final weeks of this Session.

Does the Leader of the House plan to have a debate on the economy after the autumn statement? Hon. Members want the matter to be fully debated.

In next week's business, the Leader of the House announced a two-day debate on defence. Will she confirm that that still leaves one further Adjournment debate on defence for this Session? She will know that it is customary to have three defence debates on motions for the Adjournment of the House.

Will the right hon. Lady tell us whether the House will have an opportunity to reconsider the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which is currently in

another place? That is particularly significant, because more than 125 pages of amendments have been added to it since it arrived there. The Bill that will return to the Commons is likely to be very different from that which left us, and hon. Members have not had an opportunity to scrutinise or comment on the revised Bill. Does the right hon. Lady agree with the Home Office Minister in another place, Lord Bassam, who said that the Bill was cumbersome and bureaucratic? It certainly is since another 125 pages were added to it.

Will the Leader of the House advise us whether there will be statements in the near future on the situation of Israel and Palestine, particularly as it arose during the recess and we have not yet heard from the Foreign Secretary? Will she also tell us whether a statement on the EU summit in Biarritz is anticipated? She will be aware that the previous three informal summits were the subject of statements in the House and were acclaimed as great victories by the Government. We hope that they will shortly have something positive to report on the Biarritz summit.

Finally, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), yesterday told the "Today" programme, in a debate with Trevor Kavanagh of *The Sun*, that the Prime Minister wanted to have a debate on the euro. Yesterday the Prime Minister put great emphasis on the Government's five economic tests, but we know from evidence given by Treasury Ministers to the Select Committee on the Treasury before the summer recess that the Government are not measuring progress on those five tests, and do not intend to produce any written evidence about how close we are to, or how far we are from, meeting those tests. In a spirit of co-operation, I urge the right hon. Lady to allow a debate on the Floor of the House about the single currency. We all want to join the Prime Minister in a debate on the euro.

Mrs. Beckett: I welcome the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) to her new responsibilities and join her in paying tribute to her predecessor, who was indeed an excellent shadow Leader of the House and discharged his duties with elegance and wit.

The hon. Lady asked when the Queen's Speech was last held in December. From memory I am not sure, but it has not happened for many years, probably not since the second world war. *[Laughter.]* Hon. Members have been attending these sessions for a long time, and I advise them not to laugh too soon. The hon. Lady asked whether the lateness was a reflection of the backlog. It certainly reflects the remarks of Lord Strathclyde, the leader of the Tory party in the other place, who recently said that the Lords would wish to take a full amount of time—all the time they wanted—to debate Bills, and added:

> And if that means that the Queen has to come to Parliament a little bit later than she normally does then I think that's a price worth paying.

Clearly that was the intention, and that has been the effect of the decisions taken in the Lords, where the Government do not control the timetable or the agenda.

As for the time being taken, the hon. Lady will recall that we have made two late additions to the Government's programme. One is the Football (Disorder) Bill, on which the Tory party called for legislation—and offered co-operation, although most of us would not think that that had been forthcoming. The other addition covers the Northern Ireland Bills resulting from the peace process. I do not know whether that is the cause of the lateness, but in two of the Sessions equivalent to this one in the previous three Parliaments under the Tory Government, both the Commons and the Lords sat for more days, and, indeed, passed more Bills, than we will have done this Session. We hope that a maximum of 42 Bills will be completed this Session, whereas during the equivalent Session in the 1981-82 Parliament there were 46 Bills, and during the 1985-86 Session there were 49 Bills. There is nothing unprecedented about the size of the Government's programme. It is simply that Members have wished to consider it adequately, and it has taken the Lords rather longer than it usually does to consider that number of Bills.

The hon. Lady asked for a debate on the economy. Obviously, we will consider that through the usual channels after the pre-Budget statement. I think that the Lady is mistaken in thinking that there is a defence day outstanding, but I will check that. She also asked about the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which has indeed been substantially redrafted. That, as she will know, followed representations from many who studied the Bill, not least Tory Members.

I will draw the hon. Lady's remarks about a statement on the middle east to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. She will know that oral questions to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will be taken on 7 November, and I expect that there will be a statement following the Biarritz summit. As for a debate on the euro and the five tests, it has occurred to me once or twice lately that if there is one absolutely outstanding reason for Britain to join the euro, it is so that we can get away from this perpetual nit-picking about whether what some Minister has said is different from what was said a week before.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I appeal for brief questions. This will assist every hon. Member present.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): When will there be a debate on the Liaison Committee's report, on which it is said there will be a free vote? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the debate will take place on a substantive motion?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot tell my right hon. Friend now when there will be a debate on the Liaison Committee report. To quote a previous leader of our party, "not next week". There will be a debate, and as my right hon. Friend knows, whenever there is a vote on such matters, it is a free vote—at least on this side. It is possible that Tory Members have been committed by their leader as to how they will vote.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I endorse what has been said about the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). We will miss him, not least his constructive attitude in the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons.

Was the right hon. Lady surprised that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) did not include in her requests an urgent debate on some important issues

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

arising from the statement that we have just had from the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food? Perhaps, with her usual modesty, the hon. Lady felt that as a former Agriculture Minister she might feature too strongly in such a debate.

Will the Leader of the House consider now some issues that cannot wait for the Government to investigate fully in all Departments all the implications of an extremely comprehensive report? I am particularly concerned about matters relating to secrecy, accountability and trust. The right hon. Lady will have noted the comment of Lord Phillips and his team that Ministers sought to sedate the public. Even the summary of the report stated that

> The Government was preoccupied with preventing an alarmist over-reaction to BSE because it believed that the risk was remote. It is now clear that this campaign of reassurance was a mistake.

Does the Leader of the House recognise that the issue does not merely affect the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food or the Department of Health, but goes right across government? It is, of course, especially relevant to Parliament's current consideration of freedom of information legislation. We need a statement from the Government on whether they recognise the important implications of the Phillips report for that legislation.

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire, the predecessor of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton as shadow Leader of the House.

I am sure that the whole House accepts that the report on which my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has just made a statement will have substantial implications across government. Of course I will convey to my right hon. Friend the tenor of the remarks made by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) about an early discussion of various aspects of the report. I simply point out to him that as the report includes 16 volumes and contains 167 recommendations, it is more likely than not that, although people may pick some of the issues that it raises for individual debates, a more substantive debate can be held only at some little time in the future. From conversations that I have held with my right hon. Friend, I am aware that he is adamant—as he was at the Dispatch Box today—that it is essential to look at the report in the round, and that he wants the House and the public to do that.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall makes important points about the implications for freedom of information legislation. The Government believe that the regime that we are establishing is a substantial improvement on the previous one—but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that there are other opportunities to discuss those matters.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): May I also emphasise the need for an early debate on the BSE crisis? My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made a statement, but he is a very kind man, and it all boils down to the fact that for the best part of 18 years, a Tory Government and their Ministers were more concerned about saving their own skins than about the victims of CJD. The brutality was re-emphasised by the fact that they did not even have the decency to set up a compensation fund for the victims of CJD. That had to be done by the Labour Government. If the Ministers who were guilty had been in local government, they would have been surcharged and kicked out of office.

Mrs. Beckett: There will in due course be a debate on these matters, and my hon. Friend and those who share his view will have the opportunity to make their points. He is right to highlight the fact that—for whatever reason—the previous Government took the decision that there should not be a compensation scheme. I was pleased to hear Members on both sides of the House welcome the fact that the Labour Government have chosen to reverse that decision.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that over the past six months the value of the pound has depreciated by 13.5 per cent. against the United States dollar. They might realise that, in order to join the euro, it would be necessary to devalue our currency by a further 20 per cent. against the US dollar. May we have an early debate, in which we could discuss the Government's policy on the effect of massive devaluations of our currency against the US dollar, both on price stability in this country and on the economic prospects for the whole United Kingdom?

Mrs. Beckett: There are many opportunities to raise such issues. I remind the hon. Gentleman, with great respect, that Conservative Members often express concern about the value of the pound and complain about the damage being caused by its high level, especially to manufacturing industry. If we held such a debate, we might explore the contradictions in the attitudes of Conservative Members. One day they call for devaluation, yet another day they are—apparently—calling for an increase in the exchange rate.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): Thank you for calling me, Mr. Speaker. As I have not had an opportunity to do so before, may I add my congratulations to those that you have already received on your election?

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will be aware of the intense pride that many in the House take in the fact that our Government played such an important part in securing international support for the Rome statute on the International Criminal Court in 1998. Has my right hon. Friend had an opportunity to consider the terms of the consultation document and draft Bill that were published in August? As the draft Bill was published in August and the consultation period expired during the recess, will my right hon. Friend find us an early opportunity to discuss that important document in this place?

The ratification of the statute will make a significant contribution to human rights throughout the world. An informed and intense debate on the legislation is going on outside the House and I am sure that my right hon. Friend agrees that it is important that the House has an opportunity to contribute to it.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but despite the careful and, if I may say so, elegant way in which he put his request, I suspect that he is inviting me to speculate on the contents of the Queen's Speech. He will know that I do not do that.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Could we not at least have a debate on the implications

of the continuing collapse of the euro, which is a time bomb for the rest of Europe? Also, could the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to be made next week to give guidance to Members of Parliament on whether it is right and proper to place bets on the result before registering their votes on important issues?

Mrs. Beckett: First, as I said in response to an earlier question, there are many such opportunities. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman will know that Treasury questions are being tabled today, which provides opportunities to raise issues about the euro. As for the hon. Gentleman's final remark, I am pleased to say that that is not a matter for me.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): In recent correspondence with me, the planning inspectorate admitted that one of its inspectors misdirected himself in ruling on an appeal from my constituents, the Dale family, in relation to building a bungalow. However, the only redress that the inspectorate is offering my constituents is judicial review, the cost of which is beyond the reasonable means of any person or family. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to look at the state of our planning laws? Will she ensure that the House has an opportunity to discuss those laws in an Adjournment debate before the Queen's Speech?

Mrs. Beckett: The whole House will understand and sympathise with the position in which my hon. Friend's constituents find themselves. Indeed, I accept completely my hon. Friend's point about judicial review being the only channel open to them. A review of planning legislation is currently being undertaken, and my hon. Friend may well wish to draw the attention of Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to the issue that he has raised. I shall certainly draw his remarks to their attention. As for the request for a debate, however, I fear that all that I can offer my hon. Friend is Environment questions next week.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): Will the Leader of the House find time to make an early statement on the reference to the Review Body on Senior Salaries of costs allowances and related matters which was recently announced in a written answer in the other place? Am I right that the Government's decision to make the reference merely implements a decision taken by the previous Government? If the right hon. Lady does not have time to make a statement, will she make it clear how hon. Members can best make representations and submissions? What is the time scale for the report and what is the scope of the current review?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right, and it is partly for that reason that a formal statement has not been made. The previous Government accepted the SSRB's recommendation that, instead of a one-off apocalyptic review from time to time, there should be a regular review and updating every two or three years. That is the source of the review that is now under way.

I hope that Members will contribute to that review. I believe that we have asked the SSRB for a letter to be sent to Members drawing their attention to the scope of its inquiries and inviting them to submit evidence, should they wish to do so. If there has been a hiccup, I undertake to look into the matter and ensure that that is done.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Is my right hon. Friend aware of a campaign in connection with the attempts by pirate salvagers to raise HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse, two warships sunk during the war with great loss of life? The attempts to raise the ships have caused great distress to many people, and many Members of Parliament have been contacted by their local royal naval associations. I have been working with the Basildon branch, where people are very distressed about the matter. The British Government have made it clear that they regard the ships as war graves, and they should be treated as such. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that some international regulations or laws are needed to protect such war graves properly. May we have an urgent debate on the matter, and on the need to make representations to international bodies and other countries about it?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I know that she is one of those who has campaigned with her local royal naval association. As was evident from the reaction across the House to her remarks, the whole House shares her view that those vessels are important war graves, and not something to be plundered. I undertake to draw her remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. I cannot promise my hon. Friend an early debate, but I can make sure that her request for international action is conveyed to the proper quarters.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the Leader of the House try to arrange for the Home Secretary to come to the Chamber next week to make a statement on the Criminal Cases Review Commission? Is she aware that there is growing concern about the delay in the commission's deliberations on the case of Stephen Downing? She will no doubt have seen much publicity about the case during the summer months. Stephen Downing has now been in prison for a considerable time, and his case has been with the CCRC since its inception.

Mrs. Beckett: I will certainly undertake to draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks and the concern that lies behind them to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. I cannot undertake to suggest that there will be a statement on the matter in the near future, but obviously when my right hon. Friend has had a chance to consider his remarks, he will take them into account.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): My right hon. Friend will be aware that next Wednesday in Westminster Hall I have a debate on Saint-Gobain's takeover and threatened closure of Biwater at Clay Cross, which would mean the loss of 700 jobs. Early-day motion 1084 also refers to the matter.

[*That this House finds it to be totally unacceptable that the French-based multi-national company Saint-Gobain should have acquired the shares of Biwater (Clay Cross) Ltd for the immediate purpose of closing the plant; is deeply concerned that this will lead to the loss of 700 jobs and the devastation of the local community; is aware that Saint-Gobain's objectives in moving to close the plant are (a) to destroy the pipe manufacturing capacity of a key rival, especially in international markets, (b) to capture Biwater's extensive and growing order book, essentially for transfer to overseas companies and (c) to transfer and asset strip the plant's machinery; and calls upon the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to prevent the*

closure by making full and effective use of powers available to him under the Fair Trading Act 1973, which includes the possibility of setting up an immediate inquiry into the take-over by the Competition Commission and halting all moves to close the plant while the Commission undertakes an in-depth investigation which it is believed will lead to the saving of the plant and the condemnation of Saint-Gobain's actions.]

My right hon. Friend may not be aware that a mass petition from my constituents was handed in today at No. 10 Downing street in connection with the matter. May we have a wider debate? It has transpired that the Secretary of State has been misled by the Office of Fair Trading, which did not inform him that when it was producing a report, it knew that the closure plans existed. The role of the OFT, the Secretary of State's position in relation to the Fair Trading Act 1973, and whether matters should go to the Competition Commission could be discussed—a debate that is probably relevant to many other cases. If my right hon. Friend cannot manage to provide such a debate, will she at least ensure that the Prime Minister responds to the petition given to him at Downing street today?

Mrs. Beckett: I am very conscious of the campaign that my hon. Friend and other colleagues have conducted on the matter, and I saw the demonstrators at Downing street this morning. My hon. Friend rightly says that he has already secured a debate on the issue in Westminster Hall. He will have the opportunity to raise those points then. I will certainly draw his remarks about the petition to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, but I cannot undertake to find time for a further debate. In the debate that he has secured, my hon. Friend will have the opportunity to make his points to Ministers from the Department of Trade and Industry, and I shall make sure that they are given notice of the concerns that he intends to raise.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): In view of the Prime Minister's admission yesterday that Britain's joining the euro would have constitutional implications, will time be made available for Ministers to come to the House and announce whether they will publish a White Paper on the subject? In view of the Treasury's admission to the Select Committee, it is clear that the Government's five economic tests are no basis whatever for a judgment on whether Britain should join. The Prime Minister desperately is seeking to avoid the critical area in which there is a decision to be taken in principle—the matter of the constitution—despite being forced to admit yesterday that there were implications.

Mrs. Beckett: The House will recall from the words that the Prime Minister used, not just yesterday—he has used them on many occasions—that there is no secret. There is no admission to be made. It is clear that there are constitutional implications in joining the euro; the Government have never resiled from that. Nevertheless, we have always said that we do not believe that—when the economic case is made—those implications outweigh the potential advantages. I see no need for another White Paper to say what everyone already knows and is discussing at length all the time.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): In 1998, the now retired chief scientific officer put into the public domain our policy for dealing with cross-departmental scientific policy issues. In the light of the obvious reference to that matter in the earlier statement on BSE, and because the subject covers a much broader consideration of science and hazard assessment, will my right hon. Friend consider holding a separate debate in the near future on the whole issue of cross-departmental policy development on hazard assessment, and the improvement of public understanding of that? That will allow us to ensure that in future, the public are given confidence that matters such as the BSE tragedy will be dealt with more transparently?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate in the near future. However, my hon. Friend raises a valid issue that deserves serious consideration. I understand that one outcome of the Westminster Hall experiment is that many hon. Members find it a suitable venue for such serious and thoughtful debates, and I believe and hope that someone will take the opportunity to raise this matter there.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Does the right hon. Lady agree that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was wrong to say that pensioners should be rebranded because to be old was not cool? Perhaps at the same time she could also reject the remarks of her hon. Friend, one of the Ealing Members, who said that we should not worry about pensioners because they are all Conservative and racist? Does she agree that there is a good opportunity to have a debate next week on the proposition that we should establish a ministry for the third age, so that all the issues relating to the care of older people, such as their employment prospects, health care and pension plans, are considered in their entirety? If not next week, does she not agree that such a debate should be held in the near future?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not aware of the words that the hon. Gentleman attributed to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. They do not sound like my right hon. Friend's words. I am well aware that the words he attributed to my hon. Friend the Ealing Member—we all know who he means—are not accurate. My hon. Friend did not say them, as he has repeatedly made clear, and is distressed by the imputation. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not wish to lay those words unfairly at my hon. Friend's door.

There are many issues to discuss concerning policy for the elderly, not least—many Labour Members would like to hear this discussed—the implications of the Conservative party's new pension policy to abolish the extra money provided by the Labour Government and to make the sums involved taxable, thereby almost certainly making a large number of pensioners worse off. Although I understand the attractions of such a debate, I fear that it will not happen next week.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): May we have a debate on early-day motion 1069, which was tabled in response to the report of the Competition Commission on supermarket practices?

[*That this House notes the findings of the recent Competition Commission inquiry that some major supermarkets 'distorted competition in the supply of groceries' with the effect of helping to kill off competition*

from smaller shops; welcomes the conclusion that this 'operates against the public interest', but deplores the perverse decision that no action should be taken in this regard; and therefore calls upon the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to ask the Director General of Fair Trading to advise on steps to be taken to protect the owners of small businesses from unfair competition aimed at destroying their livelihoods.]

There is considerable concern among the farming community in my constituency about some supermarket practices, which the report identified as against the public interest. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House would welcome such a debate.

Mrs. Beckett: Again, I understand the pressure for such a debate, which I am sure would be interesting. However, Westminster Hall would also be a suitable venue for it. Sadly, it would not be easy to find time to discuss such issues on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Over the past few weeks, several thousand jobs have been shed in south Wales by Japanese high-tech companies. There is a continuing and deepening crisis. Has the Secretary of State for Wales suggested that he intends to come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement on that important matter? If not, will the right hon. Lady make time available to debate the deepening crisis?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the concerns that I know there are in Wales following some of the announcements that have been made. I know that that is a matter of anxiety to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales. The hon. Gentleman will know of all the pressure on time in the House, but although I cannot promise him a debate, I certainly undertake to draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the future of the Ford plant in Dagenham, flowing from the decision by the Ford motor company to end car assembly there? Despite a recent decision to improve investment in diesel engines at the plant, there is still widespread concern in the community at large about the area's future. It would be appropriate to debate other issues concerning the Thames gateway at the same time.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the concerns in Dagenham. I recognise that, as my hon. Friend has said, those concerns have not all been eased by the announcement of further investment by Ford, very welcome though that is. Although that it is one of the worthy subjects to be debated, I fear that I cannot find time for a debate in the near future. However, my hon. Friend will know that there are Trade and Industry questions next week.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that the Prime Minister failed again yesterday to say what he thinks are the constitutional issues surrounding the euro, why does not the right hon. Lady arrange for an early debate in Government time on the subject of the single European currency, which the Prime Minister could open, explaining once and for all to the House whether he shares the verdict of the former Spanish Prime Minister, Felipe Gonzalez, who supports the euro but says that entry represents the greatest abandonment of sovereignty since the foundation of the European Community?

Mrs. Beckett: I should first remind the hon. Gentleman that, if the Conservative party thinks that the matter should be very urgently debated, it could have debated it during yesterday's Opposition day, during which it chose to debate two other subjects. He says that there are important constitutional issues; that is undoubtedly true. It is also true that the Government are promising the British people a referendum on any decision. That is the time at which all those constitutional issues can and no doubt will be aired.

I say again to the hon. Gentleman, who I am sure is very conscious of the fact, that there are two totally different positions that make sense. One is to say that the constitutional position is so grave that we should never join, and the other is to join if it is in Britain's interests to do so. It makes no sense to say, "Not for five years," which is his party's policy.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Thank you for calling me, Mr. Speaker, and congratulations.

May I ask my right hon. Friend for a debate on the national plan for the national health service, which was released some weeks ago? Generally, the plan is very welcome, but the proposal to abolish community health councils has caused much concern. I have received representations from my CHC in Havering on the issue, and it would seem that there has been little or no consultation of the councils themselves. There is a fear that the powers of CHCs will be dissipated over such a wide area that they will become pretty ineffective. Could we have a debate?

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware of the concerns felt and the fact that people wish to discuss the proposals on community health councils. I believe that I am right in saying that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), is conducting consultations, and she would no doubt welcome views. I fear that I cannot promise an early debate on the matter, but such is the importance of the national plan that I am confident that there will be occasions on which it will be debated in the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must move to the main business of the day.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is it a convention of the House that those who have attended a statement throughout and have stood each time since it was made may be allowed to pose a question?

Mr. Speaker: No. It is entirely at my discretion who is called.

Defence Procurement

[Relevant documents: First Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, on the OCCAR Convention, HC 69, and the Government's response thereto, HC 224; Sixth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, on the Appointment of the New Chief Scientific Adviser, HC 318, and the Government's response thereto, HC 731; Ninth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, on the Future of DERA, HC 462, and the Government's response thereto, HC 901; and Tenth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, on Major Procurement Projects, HC 528, and the Government's Response thereto, HC 902.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Mr. Speaker: I should inform the House that there is a 15-minute limit on speeches from Back Benchers.

2.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I shall outline the Government's achievements in procurement and in modernising our nation's defences, highlight the fundamental choices that Britain faces on defence, and set out the way forward for our equipment programme.

The strategic defence review, in which the Government set out our defence objectives and a clear view of how those would be achieved, identified the need for improvements and for a number of new vessels.

The Government set out new plans, which we are a long way down the path to achieving. We have put in place the development work for our two new aircraft carriers; we have placed contracts for the design work for the first of our new class of type 45 destroyers; and work is under way on building two new survey vessels.

Today, I shall announce the way forward in relation to two further competitions—first, on our strategic lift requirement, and secondly, on the competition to replace our current fleet of amphibious landing ships, known as the new alternative landing ships logistics, or ALSLs.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: Taken together, these developments represent good news for our Navy and marines, good news for our shipyards, and very good news indeed for Britain. This is Labour in government ensuring that Britain's defences are ranked with the best in the world. I hope that the House will therefore understand why I prefer to announce the way forward on both these competitions, before taking interventions, which I should be delighted to take thereafter.

In identifying the need for improvements to our strategic lift, the strategic defence review recognised that in the post-cold war world, we need to be able to move our forces quickly to trouble spots overseas, and to sustain them properly when they are there.

I was therefore pleased be able to announce earlier this year planned enhancements to our strategic airlift, with the lease from next year of four C-17s and the acquisition towards the end of the decade of 25 of the new airbus A400M transport aircraft, subject to the conditions that I laid out then. Overall, that represents an investment of some £3.5 billion.

The joint rapid reaction forces need sealift to move their heavy equipment, such as main battle tanks and heavy engineering equipment. We have in the past relied on the commercial charter market to provide the majority of the ships that we needed, but the Gulf war showed the potential difficulty of securing sufficient suitable vessels in periods of crisis, particularly when our allies are in precisely the same market. The strategic defence review therefore established that we should secure six roll on/roll off ferries to assure a sufficient level of strategic sealift. The Kosovo crisis reinforced that requirement.

As the House is aware, ro-ros are non-warlike vessels. They will be standard commercial ships, to be used for transporting equipment. They are not expected to enter combat areas. They are not, therefore, by any conceivable definition, warlike.

Most significantly, we will not need six ships at all times—only during major exercises, or in times of crisis when we are deploying the joint rapid reaction force. Under the proposed private finance initiative contract, when the ships are not being used by the Ministry of Defence, they will be used for commercial trade by their owners. As a result, the private sector bears part of the financial risk, the cost to the taxpayer is kept to a minimum, and expensive pieces of equipment are used efficiently. Had we sought to build, own and operate those ships ourselves, we would in effect have had to pay a premium for two ships that we did not always need.

In passing, I remind hon. Members on both sides of the House that we were not alone in opting for the PFI route. The previous Government also opted for a Europe-wide PFI solution based on value for money to meet their sealift requirement. How do we know this? Because they advertised on that basis in February 1997 in the *Official Journal* of the EC. The only difference was that the previous Government were committed to ordering only two ships, rather than the six that we are ordering.

The competition has therefore necessarily been subject to EU treaty and public procurement rules. The legal opinion on that is quite clear. For this reason we are not able to specify that the ships should be built in the United Kingdom, as we can and do for all warships for the Royal Navy.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I understand that he has much to say and wants to get on, but I cannot let his remarks about the previous Government pass. The previous Government advertised and took advice from industry, which was part of the process. All the advice that they received was negative, so a rethink began. There was no commitment by the previous Government to go down the road on which the present Government have embarked.

The right hon. Gentleman said earlier that roll on/roll off vessels were not warlike, as they did not enter the war zone. That is not the sole criterion, as he knows. The question is the extent to which the Ministry of Defence can call on such vessels. The right hon. Gentleman's own tender document specifies one ship at five days' readiness—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. That is an extremely long intervention. The debate is

important and many hon. Members want to speak. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is a Front-Bench spokesman, but interventions must be shorter.

Mr. Hoon: Let me deal with the advertisement in the *Official Journal*. If the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) is saying that the problems experienced by the previous Government were caused by the advertisement that they placed, I can well understand why industry was anxious about their policies. Placing an advertisement in the *Official Journal* is a clear indication that the Government intend to go ahead with the contract in question. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that the previous Government placed advertisements to invite industry to participate in a competition, but that they did not really mean it, that says much about their attitude towards industry.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Hoon: No. I want to deal with these matters in the round. It was probably a mistake for me to give way a few minutes ago. I intend to make these announcements comprehensively.

We were anxious to encourage competitive UK bids for the ships, and asked all consortiums to explore fully the opportunities for UK build. Indeed, bidders offering overseas build have had to show that UK yards would not have been competitive for those particular ships.

I emphasise that, under EU rules, the Government are not allowed to direct that such ships are built in the UK. The only legal ground on which we are able to award the contract is value for money, defined by reference to price, quality and delivery.

Nevertheless, I am pleased to announce that two of the ships will be built in the UK. Subject to final negotiations, we intend to sign a 25-year contract with the Andrew Weir Shipping Ltd. group based in the UK. This is not a shipbuilding contract, but a contract for the provision of a complete service, including crewing, maintenance, and management of the ships. Andrew Weir has stated that it will provide British crews when the ships are in Ministry of Defence use. The winning bid involves the construction of two ships by Harland and Wolff in Belfast, with the other four to be built in the Flensburger yard in Germany.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: The contract is worth about £950 million in total. Of that, 85 per cent.—more than £800 million—will be spent in the United Kingdom, in Britain's interests, in the interests of the armed forces, and, I am pleased to say, in helping to sustain UK jobs at Harland and Wolff.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) *rose—*

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin) *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: Moreover, building two of the ships at Harland and Wolff ensures that our armed forces will have the full sealift capability by 2003—the earliest delivery offered by any of the bids—and this option, with ships built against a proven design, was cheaper than any of those offered by any other consortium.

It is expected that the order will secure between 400 and 600 jobs in Northern Ireland, and give opportunities for UK suppliers throughout the 25-year period of the contract. Harland and Wolff can also expect to benefit from the partnership with Flensburger. That will further enhance the Northern Ireland yard's prospects of further orders from the international commercial market.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hoon: Let me complete the statement, and I shall certainly give way in due course. I know that some right hon. and hon. Members will be disappointed that shipyards of particular concern to them have not been selected, but I want to proceed to the second announcement, so that the House has a complete picture of what is intended.

The strategic defence review recognised the need to improve our amphibious shipping. We have organised a competition to build two new amphibious landing ships—or, to use the jargon, alternative landing ships logistic. Unlike the roll on/roll off ferries, these are warships and therefore will be built in British yards.

Such capable and flexible vessels are designed to deploy amphibious forces directly into a hostile environment. They provide a capability to be used in conjunction with the new landing platform dock ships, HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, to deploy the lead elements in an amphibious force. Landing ships like these can also support small and non-warfighting operations, as did two in the taskforce for operation Palliser to Sierra Leone. Currently, this capability is provided by five ageing landing ships. The bulk of these vessels are now more than 30 years old. The vessels are increasingly expensive to maintain, and are severely limited in their operational utility.

I hope that the House will be pleased to learn that I can announce today that we intend to buy four ALSLs, not two. Subject to negotiation of satisfactory terms and conditions, Swan Hunter (Tyneside) Ltd. has been selected as lead shipyard for the programme. Two ALSLs will be built on the Tyne by Swan Hunter, creating 1,000 new jobs in its Tyneside shipyard. This will bring the work force up to 1,800 at their peak, while sustaining about 200 jobs off site. The other two ALSLs will be built to the same design as the two which we intend to negotiate with Swan Hunter. Given that we need these ships as quickly as possible, capacity constraints at Swan Hunter mean that we have decided that they need to be built elsewhere.

Subject to satisfactory contract negotiations, which will be informed by Swan Hunter's price for the first two vessels, these two further ships will therefore be constructed at BAE Systems' Govan yard on the Clyde. Swan Hunter will be contracted by the Ministry of Defence to provide the necessary lead shipyard design services.

The overall value of the contracts which we hope to place for these new 16,000 tonne ships will be about £300 million. Steelwork could begin by the middle of next year. It is worth noting that the contract value of each ALSL is broadly equivalent to building two ro-ro ferries. It is expected that the order will secure about 800 jobs at the Govan yard, together with about 200 jobs off site.

[Mr. Hoon]

I am offering a real lifeline to the BAE yard at Govan, one that will help to sustain the shipbuilding skills base on the Clyde until the type 45 programme comes on stream. I am confident that the management and the unions there will react enthusiastically.

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): It is regrettable that a statement was not made earlier so that we might fully examine these matters. When will steelwork begin in the Govan yard? It is crucial that the yard be filled now.

Mr. Hoon: I indicated that we would hope that steelwork could begin by the middle of next year. The precise timing is a matter of negotiation between Swan Hunter and BAE Systems. I understand that there is no good reason why that should not occur towards July.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): I appreciate the work that is coming to Clydeside. It will be welcomed by the work force, whose members have been on tenterhooks for about 18 months. However, there is a difficulty in the immediate short term about the steelwork. Is my right hon. Friend able to clarify when an order for a floating dock might be awarded? Is it possible to have that order immediately to fill the short-term gap? Many in the shipbuilding industry deprecate the fact that the orders for the ro-ros are going to Germany. An order should have been placed within the United Kingdom to maintain maximum employment and to ensure competitive abilities for the future.

Mr. Hoon: As for the ro-ro ferries and UK build, I set out in considerable detail the legal difficulties that any Government would have faced in trying to place an order for a commercial ship in a UK yard. It would not have been possible. We have discussed these matters at great length over a long period. The legal advice was absolutely clear. The reality is that we could not direct these ships to be built in the UK, because of European Union rules. In the circumstances, we have considered the capacity that is available in UK yards. We have also had regard to the comprehensive programme of shipbuilding. If my hon. Friend examines my statement at greater length, I think he will find that we have been able to provide work at a number of shipyards, and particularly Govan.

As for the gap between the present availability of orders and the prospect of orders in future, I understand that the work that we hope will go to Govan will be sufficient to allow Govan to continue and to provide work for its employees.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): This is extremely disappointing news for Appledore, a good commercial yard which has worked extremely hard and thrived in the commercial world. The Secretary of State has talked about value for money. We are talking about public money, and money that should be accounted for. Will the right hon. Gentleman ensure that full details of all successful tenders are placed in the Library for scrutiny?

Mr. Hoon: We have been in regular contact with Appledore. I share the hon. Gentleman's admiration for the skills and ability of that yard. In recent times, it has been successful in securing MOD work. I am confident that it will be equally successful in securing MOD work in the near future.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): I welcome the good news for Harland and Wolff, Tyneside and Govan. I have yet to meet a shipyard or dockyard worker who wants his success to be paid for at the price of someone else's job. The Government are providing a good balance and a lifeline until the biggest warship order that the UK has seen for years comes into effect. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this makes it even more important that we promote defence diversification to ensure that the excellent engineering skills that we have at Govan and elsewhere find new markets and new opportunities for employment?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I can give her the undertaking that she seeks. She has commented knowledgeably on these matters over a long time. I look forward to further discussions with her, especially on defence diversification.

Mr. Blunt: A lot of money—£950 million—is to be spent on ro-ro ferries. Has any consideration been given to acquiring secondhand ro-ro ferries? What is the case for and against that option?

Mr. Hoon: A great deal of work has been undertaken over a long period to identify the appropriate requirement for this sort of equipment. We have access to various vessels on the charter market, but unfortunately they could not be secured. We could have looked round to ascertain whether there were suitable secondhand but necessarily older and dated vessels available. It was judged that the best way of proceeding was in partnership with the private sector. That is precisely the solution that the previous Government arrived at in judging what was the best for the public purse. Given that we do not require the six vessels all the time, it makes sense that they are used commercially to generate income, rather than being left idle for what could be long periods.

Mr. Galloway: As a Member representing one of the yards concerned, I am grateful finally to have caught my right hon. Friend's eye. In reality, his announcement is not good enough. He will have to go the extra mile. The two ALSLs will not be enough to keep the Govan shipyard open and to employ those who depend upon its activities. My right hon. Friend has acknowledged that the steel will not be cut before June next year. However, Govan runs out of steelwork tomorrow. What will happen between tomorrow and June next year?

I underscore the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson) that we shall have to have something else. The most obvious answer is the floating platform—the submarine repair dock—for which there is now a vital need. It is even more needed than we imagined hitherto. As its technology is essentially that of a large bathtub, it has the advantage of being able to be started upon tomorrow.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the extent to which he has responded to the campaign of the trade unions, the Secretary of State for Scotland and others, but he will have to go an extra mile. If not, what he has

announced will not get us out of the hole that we have feared, with members of the work force being thrown on the dole for Christmas.

Mr. Hoon: I understand my hon. Friend's concern about his constituents and the yard. Such considerations have been at the forefront of the Government's collective mind for many months, and he and his colleagues have raised questions with me and other Ministers. However, we have been in close consultation and negotiation with BAE Systems, which has assured us that the work will be sufficient to keep the yard open and, specifically, to bridge the gap until the type 45 work becomes available. If my hon. Friend writes to me, I shall examine the issues he raises sympathetically, but I assure him that those are precisely the issues that we have discussed with BAE Systems and I understand their position to be that the work will preserve the future of Govan and its work force.

Mr. Duncan Smith: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Our debate has turned into a statement. No prior notice was given that such announcements would be made, so many interested hon. Members are not present. The main point is that, as we have just discovered, the Government made the announcement in a press release in Scotland this morning—which goes against what the Speaker and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have said repeatedly. Are not such actions an abuse of the House?

Mr. Hoon: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not want to anticipate anything you might say, but I thought that it would be for the convenience of the House if I made the announcements in the course of a debate on defence procurement that was already scheduled. Clearly, it would have been possible to have made a statement—taking an hour of parliamentary time—and then to have embarked on the debate, but that seemed a somewhat artificial division, given that the subject matter of both statement and debate is defence procurement—*[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, the shadow Defence Secretary says that people already knew, but I assure him that, with the exception of those now sitting on the Treasury Bench, no one was aware.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Now that the Secretary of State has responded, let me point out that Mr. Speaker has made it clear that he wants all important decisions that affect the House and that should be heard first by the House to be announced in the House. I know nothing of the press release mentioned, but that is Mr. Speaker's firm position. There is grave danger of an Adjournment debate developing into a statement; it is not a statement, and I have already called for short interventions, so perhaps we can now get on with the business.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have already dealt adequately with the point of order. I shall not take any more now, because we are losing time for an important debate.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it an entirely separate point of order?

Mr. Howarth: It is a separate point of order relating to my travelling to the House and hearing on the radio—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a separate point of order.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Several hon. Members have been able to make points in interventions, and I am conscious that many more hon. Members want to speak in the debate, so I shall now address the broader subject of the debate: the Government's record on procurement.

Mr. Field: As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) and I represent two of the nine Merseyside constituencies where there are fewer people in work now than at the time of the general election, may I ask what message the decision to place orders with a firm that will build in Germany and probably subcontract work to Poland sends to our constituents about how today's announcement has affected employment prospects for Merseyside? If we stay to the end of my right hon. Friend's speech, will we hear good news for Cammell Laird?

Mr. Hoon: In respect of the ferries, Cammell Laird unfortunately failed to meet the requirements on price and delivery. As for the ALSLs, despite submitting a bid, the company withdrew from the competition, citing, among other reasons, its current commercial commitments. Although I realise that today's announcement will be disappointing to those who work at Cammell Laird and to my right hon. Friend, I have to point out that, compared with other shipyards, it currently has a relatively full order book.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: I shall give way again in due course.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It has become perfectly clear from the way in which the debate is proceeding that the Secretary of State is taking innumerable interventions from Labour Members and few—in fact, only one—from Opposition Members, even though the matters being discussed should properly have been the subject of a statement that would have given hon. Members on both sides an equal opportunity to be heard.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: From whom the Secretary of State takes interventions is not a matter for me. Yet again, we are taking time from an important debate.

Mr. Hoon: The two new ship orders I have announced form part of a wider programme of modernisation of the armed forces—a programme worth £6 billion a year. In addition, on 11 July I announced to the House the first three type 45 destroyers which, at about 7,000 tonnes, are the largest and most powerful air defence destroyers ever ordered for the Royal Navy. The two new survey vessels, HMS Echo and HMS Enterprise, will not only enhance the Navy's survey capability but be capable of supporting mine warfare and amphibious operations. The programme also includes the new assault ships Albion and Bulwark, the new Astute class submarines and, of course, the two

[Mr. Hoon]

new aircraft carriers, which enable a quantum leap in our ability to project force around the world. That is the largest programme of warship construction that this country has seen in years—all British warships, all built in British yards.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way—at last. He has mentioned the type 45 destroyers several times. Is he aware that hundreds of my constituents and those of his hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) have been issued with protective redundancy notices by Vosper Thornycroft's Woolston shipyard in Southampton? Does he realise that whether they are made redundant depends entirely on whether he firms up one of the type 45 orders by the end of the year? Will he give a commitment to do that? So far this afternoon, he has said nothing that will prevent the closure of the Woolston yard and the loss of hundreds of jobs which could be saved if the MOD simply speeded up its ordering programme.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman should examine the facts more carefully before raising those matters in such a cavalier manner on the Floor of the House. He knows that commercial discussions are taking place between the prime contractor, BAE Systems, and Vosper Thornycroft. How the issue is resolved is a matter for those two companies, and the Government have made clear their expectation that the matter will be settled between them. It is not a matter of firming up an order. The issue is a commercial one, involving two private sector companies.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): Is not the Government's strategy on warship shipbuilding in this country to retain and strengthen competition? Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that although when the merger with Marconi took place the prime contractor gave an undertaking to ensure that subcontractors in that company family did not have an advantage over outside companies, Vosper Thorneycroft is extremely concerned that it is getting a bad deal compared with BAE Systems' own contractors? Is not that playing poker with the jobs of my constituents?

Mr. Hoon: Those are precisely the commercial negotiations that have to be undertaken, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that, consistent with my announcement about the allocation of type 45 work, we expect a proper division of work between Vosper Thornycroft and BAE Systems.

Let me now address Army issues—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: I have given way several times already. I shall do so again in due course.

The deployment of Challenger 2 tanks to Kosovo has been a significant success for the Army. The tanks have displayed new standards of performance and reliability. In August, Vickers Defence Systems was selected as the preferred bidder for new armoured engineer vehicles to support Challenger 2. The roll-out of the first Westland Apache attack helicopter took place in spring, representing the achievement of a major milestone in a programme that will provide our forces with a potent new capability.

For the RAF, having learned the lessons of Kosovo, we are investing in new anti-armour missiles, an enhanced all-weather precision bombing capability and improved secure air-to-air communications to ensure that our forces can fully play their part in the most demanding of circumstances.

Those were the most pressing capability shortfalls to emerge from the Kosovo conflict and we have acted on them swiftly. Elsewhere, we have a massive forward equipment programme in place.

We are acquiring a stand-off precision strike capability in Storm Shadow, a new air-launched cruise missile; we are undertaking major programmes to modernise the strike and air defence variants of the Tornado; and we are buying a major new capability in ASTOR, the airborne stand-off radar.

On top of that, more major programmes are either under way or in our plans—Eurofighter and its new METEOR air-to-air missile, the future carrier-borne aircraft, the future strategic tanker aircraft, and, of course, as I have already mentioned, new transport aircraft in the shape of four C-17s and the A400M. All those are world-class systems. All of them will result in major enhancements to the capability and utility of our forces, and all of them are threatened by the £16 billion cuts guarantee of the Opposition.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I want to shift from aircraft to ships. As a former shipwright, I can well understand the bitterness of those hon. Members whose yards have been excluded from the orders, but I am delighted to hear that Harland and Wolff, that badly pressed yard where constituents of mine work, have the order. I am also pleased that Govan has received the order. However, I emphasise the need to fill the short-term gap in Govan by the construction of the floating platform, which I described earlier today as having all the technology of a gigantic bathtub. The technology is there, and, if that could be brought forward, it would save the highly skilled jobs. The problem in Scotland is that we react traditionally—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is making a long intervention on a point that has been made at least once this afternoon.

Mr. Hoon: I think that I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but I must pick him up on his use of the word "excluded". No British shipyard was excluded from bidding for either of the orders. As I have said today, the Government went to a great deal of trouble to ensure that British shipyards were involved and that any of those bidding to provide the service which underlies the ro-ro contract should make it clear why they had not adopted a British solution. Therefore, it is simply not right to suggest that any British yard was excluded. Decisions were wholly consistent with European law and taken on the basis of what was the best value for money.

In addition, BAE Systems has said that the order for two ALSLs is most helpful and will help to secure the future of Govan. There is a clear indication that the Government's decision on ALSLs will provide the necessary support to employment in and around the Clyde.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Will the Secretary of State concede that, regardless of which yards have been successful, there has been much uncertainty during the past few months, if not years, and that that in itself is damaging in terms of people leaving skilled jobs with resulting skill shortages in yards? In future, will the MOD's procurement policy try to ensure some continuity of ordering so that yards are not faced with the feasts and famines, the peaks and troughs that they have had in the past?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is right. If he examines carefully what I said earlier he will see that the Government have gone to a great deal of trouble in trying to provide a number of different opportunities for a number of different shipyards. But the reality is that, using that platform as a basis from which to operate, those shipyards must go out and win for themselves commercial orders in what I accept is a highly competitive world market, but a world market where a considerable number of ship orders are placed each and every day. This provides an opportunity, but no more than that, for those yards to go out and win work for themselves in the market.

Mr. Wilkinson: The right hon. Gentleman gave a total figure of £3.5 billion for the procurements. What is the breakdown between the leases for the C-17s and the acquisition of the 25 A400Ms? When will the A400Ms start coming into service? Will the C-17s remain on the RAF's books after the A400Ms come into service? Finally, will the C-17s be a lease purchase deal?

Mr. Hoon: I have made it clear, and the hon. Gentleman had the opportunity to ask those questions when I made the statement on the matter, that it would be a lease deal for C-17s. They will be available to the RAF in the short term until there is sufficient heavy lift capacity when the 25 A400Ms, or at least the first of those air transport aircraft, come into service. But clearly we will not take a decision today as to precisely when those aircraft will be available. We are in negotiation with our partners who are equally responsible for the A400M. Those are matters that we will decide as and when necessary in the light of the circumstances at the time. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to give specific answers to such questions at this stage. It would simply not be sensible to do so.

I referred to the defence cuts threatened by the Conservative party. During the past three years the Opposition have suggested that we are not spending enough on defence. But lately there seems to have been a slight change of tack by the shadow Chancellor, who now seems to be telling us that we are spending too much. This is an opportunity for Opposition Members to intervene, and I shall cheerfully give way, so that we may know precisely what their policy is—whether we are spending too much or too little and whether we are spending it on the right things or the wrong things.

I have had the benefit of looking carefully at the background briefing note supplied to Conservative Members as part of the Chancellor's spending review. On defence spending, the central office brief states:

> We will match what we can afford in the light of what the country earns: that is the true prudent policy.

I am willing to give way to any Conservative Member who wishes to explain that. It also states:

> No responsible party can promise particular increases four years down the line, whatever the economic circumstances.

Finally—perhaps the real giveaway in their policy—it states:

> Instead of making pie-in-the-sky promises about more money, Geoff Hoon should start by making we sure we get better value for money already spent.

The Opposition have a bit of a nerve. Having spent the past three years telling us that "efficiency" was code for "cuts", they now tell us that we are not efficient enough.

Mr. Bercow: Given that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) was a truly outstanding Secretary of State for Defence, would the right hon. Gentleman now care to specify exactly in which speech and on what occasion my right hon. Friend advocated a reduction in defence expenditure? If he is unable to do so, would he just for once have the good grace to apologise and withdraw that remark?

Mr. Hoon: I have cited the evidence on which I rely, which is the central office briefing. At this stage, I am in no shape or form casting any doubts on the ability of the present shadow Chancellor in his former occupancy of the position that I am now privileged to hold. What I am doing is questioning how good a shadow Chancellor he is, and making it clear that when it comes to making the choices that the country will face at the next general election, the electorate will have to choose whether they can rely on his economic policies, given the cuts that the right hon. Gentleman is proposing across the range of public expenditure, particularly with regard to defence.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): To put the issue in context, how many firm warship orders have been placed since May 1997?

Mr. Hoon: I shall not give a specific answer. A great number—

Mr. Viggers: None.

Mr. Hoon: No, that is simply not true. There are firm orders. We are not here to play guessing games about the Government's expenditure programme. We want to know the Opposition's proposed defence expenditure, and I am giving those on the Opposition Front Bench every opportunity to tell us. Will they match precisely the amounts of money being made available to defence by this Government? That is a question that they have to face up to, a question which they signally refuse to answer. They have been given an opportunity today, but, again, there has been complete silence from those on the Opposition Front Bench.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: It seems that they will be saved by their Back Benchers.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): The Secretary of State asked for examples of items for which better value

[Mr. Julian Brazier]

could be obtained. Today he has announced enormous expenditure on six shiny new ro-ros, the bulk of which will come from a German yard. Given current overcapacity in world shipping markets, I wonder whether better value could have been found, perhaps through a second-hand option. The Secretary of State's knowledge of those markets is revealed by his extraordinary statement that many vessels are placed with yards around the world every day.

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman cares to check, he will find that approximately 2,500 ships are placed for construction around the world each year. That means a lot every day. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Gentleman's grasp of mathematics is better than mine, but I doubt it given his response. *[Interruption.]* On better value, we organised a competition, and we got best value from the competition in precisely the way in which the previous Government proposed. We have achieved best value. Unless the hon. Gentleman can do no more than make rather windy assertions, he should come to the House with facts.

Mr. Brazier: The Secretary of State has gone for the most expensive option on ro-ros, and is placing the bulk of the order abroad. That has caused some consternation on the Government Benches. He should look across the Atlantic if he wants to see a model of a system that is much cheaper and more cost effective. The American system works at a far lower cost than ours.

Mr. Hoon: One of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues keeps saying that he is a mathematics scholar. Unfortunately, he clearly knows nothing about economics. If he had listened with at least half an ear, he would have heard me make it clear that we had gone for the best value-for-money solution. I am sorry that I have to translate that into simple English for him. It means the cheapest. We have gone for the cheapest option, and that means that we have excluded more expensive options. I am sorry to have set that out in such basic English, but the hon. Gentleman clearly experiences difficulty in hearing and understanding.

It is astonishing to receive lectures from the Conservative party on efficiency. The Conservative Government left us with a massive £3.25 billion cost overrun on the Ministry of Defence's 25 most expensive equipment projects. In our first three years in office, we managed to cut that figure by £500 million, thanks largely to our smart procurement initiative. By sustaining and broadening smart procurement under what we will now call smart acquisition, the improvements and efficiencies will continue.

At the outset, we set ourselves a target of reducing acquisition costs by £2 billion over 10 years. Many Opposition Members scoffed at the suggestion, but I am pleased to tell the House that we now expect to improve on that figure. Thanks to the radical reforms that we have put in place to streamline the acquisition process and cut unnecessary bureaucracy, we are already identifying huge savings that can be made in our equipment programme—savings that will be reinvested in defence.

On the Apache programme, for example, we are investing now to save as much as £30 million a year in support costs. On Challenger 2, we have identified savings of nearly £200 million over the life of the project by working closely with industry on innovative new ways of procuring ammunition and improved design for maintenance techniques. On a £200 million contract for new Rapier air defence missiles, we have achieved savings of more than 20 per cent. with the missiles delivered more quickly than through traditional procurement methods, and the contractor able to secure further export orders as a result. "Faster, cheaper, better": once that was an aspiration, now it is a practical reality.

I shall not pretend that there are no problems; there are bound to be some. The constant need to be at the technological cutting edge means that defence equipment projects will always be difficult. They will always carry risk, and a proportion will always run into problems of one sort or another. That point that has been vividly demonstrated by the problems with HMS Tireless and the rest of our nuclear-powered submarine fleet.

As hon. Members will know, HMS Tireless went alongside in Gibraltar in May following a leak of coolant water in her reactor compartment. It was decided that it would be best if Tireless was repaired in Gibraltar. It is understandable that the Government of Gibraltar sought assurances about the safety of the repair. However, it was not until September that the Chief Minister of Gibraltar agreed that the repair could go ahead.

Mr. Bercow: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Earlier, you made clear the general position of the Speaker on statements that should be made to the House. I wonder if you will offer us further guidance and thoughts, in the light of confirmatory evidence that the Secretary of State's statement was placed on the BBC website at 12.10 pm, precisely one hour and 59 minutes before the right hon. Gentleman toddled along to the Chamber to address hon. Members. What redress do hon. Members have in those circumstances?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have already made the position clear, and Mr. Speaker has made his position clear, too. Announcements that should be made first to the House should not be made to the press prior to that. I shall make sure that the matter is brought to Mr. Speaker's attention, although I am not aware of the true position.

Mr. Hoon: Further to the point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) had raised the matter with me, I could have told him that I was still writing the statement minutes before I stood up. I do not know what has appeared on the BBC website or when it appeared. May I make it clear, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that it was not my statement or words for which I am responsible? *[Interruption.]* I shall have the matter investigated. If I find that someone has released beforehand the text of my statement to the House, I shall take grave exception to that. I have always insisted on making statements on behalf of the Ministry of Defence to the House first. I shall continue to adhere to that practice.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Further to the point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is not the Minister being disingenuous? It is not a question of leaking the text of the statement, but of leaking the Government's proposals and plans. That is what matters, not the form of words in which the right hon. Gentleman chose to dress them up when he got around to writing his speech.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before the Secretary of State responds, I wish to say that I believe that we have dealt

with the matter adequately. I have taken points of order, and said all that the Chair can say at the moment. The Secretary of State has also responded; we should now get on with the debate.

Mr. Hoon: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was dealing with the problem of HMS Tireless. Unless and until the Government of Gibraltar said that they were content for the work to go ahead, it would not have been prudent or sensible to continue with the work. We therefore had to await the initial investigation to ascertain the extent of the problem and the investigation of the work that was required.

An initial assessment of the defect on Tireless was that a weld in the reactor cooling system was cracked. Further inspection showed that the cracking was more extensive than originally considered and might be generic. As soon as that possibility was identified, we launched an inspection programme for our other SSN—strategic submarine nuclear—submarines. We therefore could not have started the repair programme any sooner. The shadow Secretary of State's suggestions to the contrary are simply not borne out by the facts. They are unfortunately characteristic of his recent approach to commenting on some matters. I regret that it has been, "Speak first, think later."

Underfunding is not, as the shadow Secretary of State has suggested, to blame. The problem appears to be a design fault on submarines, which were built under successive Administrations of both parties.

I also note that the shadow Secretary of State has criticised the Government for selling our diesel-powered submarines and putting all our eggs in one basket. If the hon. Gentleman had bothered to check his facts before rushing to comment, he would have discovered that the Conservative Government took the decision to dispose of the Upholder class in the first place.

Delaying the sale of the Upholder class submarines to Canada is not a practical means of reducing the temporary shortfall in our operational capability. The first vessel has already been handed over to the Canadians. The remaining three are not ready for sea, and other important factors, including the significant amount of training our crews would require, prevent their use.

We anticipate that the necessary repairs are, in fact, relatively straightforward, but they will take some months to complete because of the protracted procedures that are required to ensure complete nuclear safety during the repair work. In peacetime, safety will always take precedence over operational requirements. The safety of the public and our own personnel is of paramount importance. I am not worried about party political point scoring, and I am sorry that Conservative Members do not seem to share that approach. We will be able to provide protection for the deterrent through the use of other assets—employing additional frigates with towed array and Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft. The safety of the deterrent will not be compromised.

There has also been considerable comment recently on the Kosovo conflict, together with a report on it by the Defence Committee. I welcome the Committee's acknowledgement that

NATO prevailed and that Operation Allied Force can fairly be counted a success.

It is, of course, right that we should look at how we might do better in the future. Indeed, many of the Committee's findings parallel those in the Ministry of Defence report on "Lessons from the Crisis", published in June last year. It is important to state that the UK's contribution to the air campaign, far from being "disappointing", as some have commented, was a leading one. We were the fourth largest supplier of combat aircraft, which carried out the third largest number of strike sorties. In looking at what lessons might be learned, we should not lose sight of that considerable success.

There has been a great deal of comment on our precision weapons capability, and I hope that the House will recognise that we have already taken steps to address that matter. We have announced the purchase of Maverick missiles, a proven system that is ideally suited for attacking point targets, particularly in situations where there is high risk of collateral damage. We have also announced that we will be procuring enhanced Paveway bombs which make use of global positioning system technology to guide them to targets in all weather conditions.

Comment has also been made on problems with secure air-to-air communications which affected a number of NATO nations during the Kosovo campaign. Following trials earlier this year, I announced in July that we are now undertaking a programme to fit secure communications to aircraft of the types used in the Kosovo campaign.

We are also addressing the need to improve our strategic ability as a result of the lessons learned in Kosovo. As well as today's announcement, I announced in May this year that we will lease four Boeing C-17 Globemaster aircraft. Our longer term requirement will be met by the A400M Airbus aircraft. In sum, we have already taken very seriously the key equipment capability lessons learned from the Kosovo campaign and we have taken quick action to improve our capabilities.

Hon. Members have expressed concern about other items of equipment. Most will have seen the lurid and sensationalist headlines about other examples of so-called "equipment failures", but I wonder how many know the truth behind the headlines and the scale of the problems that we inherited from the last Government?

Take the SA80, for example. Yes, there are problems, but they were first identified during the Gulf war—nearly 10 years ago, under a Conservative Government. It is only now that we have a Labour Government that those problems are being sorted out. The same is true of the Bowman programme. We are acutely aware of the failings of the current Clansman radio system and the crucial importance of introducing a replacement as soon as possible. However, we inherited a replacement programme that was already over time and over budget with little sign of things getting better. That is why we re-opened the competition for the Bowman requirement—because, sometimes, tough decisions have to be taken. Unlike the Conservative party, we will not shy away from taking them when the effectiveness of our armed forces is at stake.

The status quo is no longer an option. We must modernise our defences by planning for the long term now. Nowhere is that more true than with the future of defence research. The strategic defence review made clear that if the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency is not to go into decline, we must take a new approach—

[Mr. Hoon]

one that enables us to exploit fully the knowledge and technology within DERA; to improve access to civil technologies for military applications; to introduce private capital into DERA to meet its investment needs; and to provide DERA with the freedom it requires to allow it to compete for and reward staff, as well as to develop new business.

Mr. Brazier: The Secretary of State will be aware of the Select Committee's unanimous views on this matter. Was there one single well-recognised body outside Government that upheld the rather strong statement that he has just made—that failure to do something along the lines proposed would result in DERA going into steep decline?

Mr. Hoon: I have cited the justification. There was widespread support for and recognition of the fact that, if DERA is to survive and provide the high-technology research that it currently conducts, it is necessary to have access to private capital and, more importantly, to echo the way in which the private sector now conducts research.

Historically, much leading-edge research was done by Government or Government-sponsored agencies. That is no longer the case today. Much of the work that would have been done through the Government or their agencies is now being done by the private sector. It is necessary to adjust the way in which DERA operates to take account of that fact.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): In light of the Secretary of State's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), how come the Americans are perfectly happy that their own military research institutes can continue to thrive and fulfil their role without being privatised or partially privatised?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman gave away the answer to his question with his use of the word "institutes". The United States has a range of facilities available to it: some in the private sector; some, I accept, in the public sector; some part way between the two. The difference between the United States and any other country in the world, including the United Kingdom, is that the US has a wealth of available research material and institutional structures.

Mr. Davies: They are not privatised.

Mr. Hoon: The reality is that many are already in the private sector. I wish that we had greater facilities available, but this country has limited means and we have to spend those means in the best way possible. The reality is that we have only one research facility available to us. We judge that it is necessary to attract both private capital and private expertise to give DERA the opportunity of continuing its leading-edge research into the future. Part of DERA will go into the private sector; equally, part will be retained in the public sector. In a sense, that is precisely what is available to the United States Government; research available both from the private sector and the public sector.

I recognise that there are those who disagree. I am not pretending that there is widespread or unanimous support for the change. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), the Chairman of the Defence Committee, in the Chamber, and I hope that those who have misgivings will at least accept that we have taken on board some of the criticisms and modified our plans accordingly.

I must make clear that the onus is on those who oppose our plans to say how they would instead provide the commitment and investment needed for the future. Given the remarkable pace with which technology is changing, it is not, in my view, credible to expect the taxpayer alone to foot the bill. It is surely right that we should involve the private sector so that we can take DERA forward into expanding markets in the international arena. I have to say that I find it slightly odd that I should have to make that point to those in the Conservative party who were never this squeamish about public-private partnerships when they were in power.

Of course, the Conservatives are perfectly entitled to say now that they will scrap the DERA public-private partnership. However, they are not then entitled to complain about defence cuts when, on this policy alone, they would effectively be taking hundreds of millions of pounds out of the defence budget at a single stroke.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Secretary of State may be about to say what the Conservatives think about privatisations or private finance initiatives. He will know that the previous Government looked at this proposal in detail and they, of all Governments, said that it was not do-able and rejected it. That is why we are opposed to it.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for the clear indication—the first we have had—of the Conservatives' spending plans on defence. The reality is that they will have to explain to the electorate how they will find the extra money that DERA would otherwise provide to the defence budget. We have already identified within the Conservative party's general financial expenditure plans a gap of some £16 billion that it will have to fill by cuts in public services.

On defence, a new and deeper black hole is emerging. The Conservatives will have to say how they will fill that hole. Will they cut the equipment programme? We are having a defence procurement debate; this is an opportunity for the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) to say precisely which equipment programme he proposes to cut: type 45; Meteor; A400M; Eurofighter? Which is it? Which defence activity or operation will they cut? The hon. Gentleman's policy simply is not credible unless he can answer that question.

At the next general election, the people of Britain will face a clear choice on defence: between a Conservative party that would submit our armed forces and their equipment to death by a thousand cuts, and a Labour Government who are investing in the future of Britain's defences; between a Conservative party that just talks tough on defence, and a Labour Government prepared to match words with action; between a Conservative party that is committed to cutting the defence budget to pay for tax cuts for a privileged few, and a Labour Government who are committed to the first real-terms, year-on-year increase in the defence budget since the end of the cold war.

After more than a decade of cuts under the Tories, we have a Labour Government who are prepared to invest in the future of our nation's defences. Ours is a record to be proud of, and I commend it to the House.

3.9 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I will not start as I had originally planned, because the Secretary of State started with a major announcement. We expected a debate on defence procurement, but he effectively gave us a statement on a particular procurement programme, then a party political broadcast, followed by a quick trot through about 30 or 40 different programme issues, to which we shall come later.

Let me deal first with the roll on/roll off stuff. I deplore the fact that the House is the last to hear about the issue, not because of a pompous view that the House must hear first just for the sake of it, but because we should be able to question how the programme is to work. There is a nicety about giving Opposition parties notice of detailed statements so that we can ask specific questions. The press were briefed in Scotland and there was an article on the BBC website, then one of my colleagues heard something about it on the 2 o'clock news. That strikes me as an abuse not only of Parliament but of the British public, because they have a right to some answers.

There has been a deceitful process from the start in the roll on/roll off ferries programme. The Secretary of State talked about the previous Government's private finance initiative, but that Government said that they did not believe that that was ultimately the right way forward, after receiving clear indications from industry and others that the requirements for the ships were such that they could not be best met in that way.

In the strategic defence review, the Government decided to increase the requirements and to proceed with the PFI, but the tender documents show that the ships are not in essence commercial: they are military ships that can be used by some companies for some commercial activity. The PFI is a clever way of effectively giving ownership to a commercial company and thus being able to turn round and blame European competition rules for forcing us to place the orders overseas. For a Government who go on about their European credentials to use Europe as an excuse in that way is deceitful, especially as the major issues are not dealt with.

Mr. Hoon: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously telling us that the previous Conservative Government did not intend to see through the invitation that they placed in the *Official Journal* of the European Union in February 1997, two months or so before they lost the general election?

Mr. Duncan Smith: The reality is that the information and input from industry and others was such that those who left government in 1997 were clear in their minds that the programme would not have worked as they had advertised it. I make no bones about that. I believe that to be the case. If we had been in government now, my belief is that I and others would have recognised that the ships are essentially military. It is not credible to blame the Europeans.

The Secretary of State gave the game away when he talked earlier about best value and referred to getting the cheapest option. If we think for one moment that the French or Germans would place an order in Govan, for example, we are living in cloud cuckoo land. There is a serious need to rethink, not only because of jobs but because there is a strategic reason for building the ships in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Davidson: I have already made my position clear on where the orders should have gone. I seek clarification on a matter that I have pursued in some detail for some time. The Conservative Government placed the invitation in the European *Official Journal*. When did the Conservative party decide that that was not the route to follow? This is the first that I have heard about any change of mind. Had I known about this before, I would of course have been better armed when I went to pursue Ministers. I wonder whether this is a debating trick being produced out of a hat, or whether it is a genuine change of mind. If it is, why did the hon. Gentleman not tell us about it ages ago?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I have talked to colleagues of the hon. Gentleman about this matter—one, in particular, who is not present in the Chamber today—and expressed that view to them. It was not possible to raise the matter in the House, because no announcement was made by the Government. My comments are also on record in the Scottish press. In my view, the requirements of the tender have always made the ships military vehicles with a commercial aspect, not the other way round. I am not making a party political point. This is a national issue on which I fundamentally disagree with the Government's interpretation. I am sorry that those who would have built the ships in Govan will not necessarily do so, not only because of jobs but because that would have benefited the United Kingdom.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman's last remarks will help the House to make a judgment on who exactly lives in cloud cuckoo land. He is entitled to his view, which he has emphasised, but he supported the previous Government, who took quite a different view and placed the invitation in the *Official Journal*. Had the requirement been for a warlike, military vessel, they would not have had to do that.

I accept that the hon. Gentleman was well known in the previous Parliament for disagreeing with the then Government on Europe, but it is not enough for him to say that we are now blaming the Europeans. We are all Europeans. We are subject to the rules of the European Union, to which, incidentally, and however much he may regret it, that Government signed up. We are simply applying the rules in accordance with our legal advice. It is not enough for him to substitute his own view—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am reluctant to interrupt the Secretary of State, but he spoke for an hour earlier, and those on both Front Benches must realise that, although they have important contributions to make—indeed, they are the centrepiece of our debate—we also have an awful lot of Back Benchers here who want to say something.

Mr. Duncan Smith: We can go round and round the fence debating what was the previous Government's intention, but the key fact remains that the Government have chosen today to announce in essence that orders for four ships that should have been placed with a British

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yard will go to a foreign yard. The prime candidate would have been Govan, but any British yard would have done. I disapprove of the Government's shameful action and, if we were in government today, I would not be doing as they are.

Mr. Bercow: Given the Secretary of State's earlier disingenuousness, does my hon. Friend agree that the very least that the right hon. Gentleman owes the House is that he should urgently initiate a full leak inquiry to establish precisely how his intentions got out earlier than he supposedly intended? Should not that inquiry involve full interrogation of senior members of the Ministry of Defence press office and of—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We have already more than adequately dealt with that subject.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I will not answer my hon. Friend, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I hope that he can pursue the matter directly with the Secretary of State.

It is probably best to move on now from the roll on/roll off saga. We have not had a good day on that in the House, so let us move on and hope that there will be deeper and further investigations, both up in Scotland and in other shipyards, as well as here in Parliament, where I hope that we can return to the matter, perhaps even next week.

I turn now to the main issue of smart procurement, around which the debate revolves.

Mr. Davidson: I am conscious that the hon. Gentleman wants to move away from the question of the ro-ros, and I am happy to do so, but will he clarify the Opposition's position with regard to the other orders for landing ships? Where would the hon. Gentleman place the orders for those four ships?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I meant no discourtesy to the yards that have received the orders, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has given me the opportunity to congratulate them. Clearly, I congratulate the Govan yard on the order that it has been given, and I sincerely hope that it is enough to get the yard through a difficult time. The other yard to have secured orders is Swan Hunter, and I congratulate it too. The hon. Gentleman is right: I should have said something about the matter, and I apologise to the House for not doing so.

However, I have visited the yard at Appledore, and I am distinctly worried that we could lose the key shipbuilding expertise of what is one of the few remaining yards in the south-west region of the country. I am not about to shed any crocodile tears: I am the first to accept that previous Governments have made many mistakes, but we are at the point where we must decide what we feel about our national shipbuilding capability.

I hope that there will be an opportunity to debate such matters. The Swan Hunter yard is sitting on an order for type 45 vessels, but the Secretary of State today did not mention a matter about which the Govan yard is also waiting for news. If the Secretary of State had said that type 45 orders were to be placed, I should have liked to know exactly when that would happen.

Mr. Burnett: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Appledore yard, which is in my constituency. It is a very competitive yard, with an outstanding work force. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if the orders about which he has spoken had gone there, they would have allowed it to enlarge its covered yard? That would have increased Appledore's capacity and competitiveness and allowed it to offer greater value for money—for the Ministry of Defence as for others.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I recognise that. As I said, I visited Appledore, and happen to think that, as well as having a brilliant work force, it has a brilliant chief executive. I wish that the Secretary of State would meet him. He would be persuaded that there is a man who knows about shipbuilding. He is quite superb—as I am sure are the chief executives of other yards.

However, taking four ships away from British yards means that there are fewer to spread around. If those four vessels were ordered to be built in this country, shipyards such as Appledore might, if not prosper, at least find life a little easier.

I now move on to the broader subject of smart procurement. First, I want to say that I welcome the Government's measures, arising out of the SDR, to improve the streamlining and efficiency of acquisition procedures. That is the benefit that smart procurement has brought, and it is not a question of party politics. However, before Ministers glow too warmly and get too happy about that compliment, I have to say that that streamlining followed a lot of work by the previous Government, who recognised that change was necessary. Smart procurement may be a new initiative in terms of language, but all its components were gestating in the Ministry of Defence before this Government took over.

In that regard, I wish to give credit to Sir Robert Walmsley, who has played a huge role in driving smart procurement along. Credit is also due to Sir Sam Cowan's work at the Defence Logistics Organisation. I am sure that the Secretary of State and the House will agree that, although civil servants elsewhere in government have been criticised today, those two are shining examples of how best to make departments work.

It has been clear for a long time that procurement procedures had to be reformed. I am the first to admit that. It was encouraging that the Government began with a logical and rational procedure, aligning equipment needs to future military strategy. Smart procurement's reduction of input resources in terms of staff and its transfer of responsibility to industry, alongside the rationalisation of the Defence Procurement Agency, was a good start, as was the creation of the DLO.

However, I want to turn to the budgetary element of the smart procurement strategy. The Secretary of State dealt with that aspect, but it deserves examination. The Government claim that smart procurement will achieve savings of about £2 billion over 10 years. Everyone hopes that smart procurement will live up to that aspiration. If it does not, our armed forces could be left dangerously under-equipped.

However, the National Audit Office review "Major Projects Report 1999" stated

> It is too early to tell whether Smart Procurement will fulfil all of its aims

The Public Accounts Committee has also criticised the way in which Ministers have measured savings from smart procurement. It stated:

> A proportion of the £2 billion savings . . . represents deferred expenditure.

What assurance can the Secretary of State and his Ministers give that the Government's future equipment programme is affordable, if so many existing projects are over budget? How can that be squared? If that cannot be done now, I hope that the Under-Secretary, when he winds up the debate, will give the House some answers in absolute terms. I hope that he, or the Secretary of State, will say which programmes will have to be cut if smart procurement does not meet the ambitions savings targets that have been set. Much of the Ministry of Defence's budget rests on three elements, one of which is achieving the savings targeted for smart procurement. Some of the equipment programmes may be in difficulty if the savings are not achieved.

Other difficulties associated with smart procurement need to be raised. For example, will the Secretary of State say why the recently appointed smart acquisition team has been given a life of only one year? Does the Ministry have a longer-term commitment to making smart acquisition work? I hope that the Under-Secretary will answer that question when he winds up. Why has the team been given only one year, rather than longer? What is the plan?

Does the Secretary of State have any plans to merge the DPA and the DLO? That merger is beginning to look logical, and I hope that the Under-Secretary will deal with that when he winds up.

The role of smart procurement in collaborative programmes is also important. I shall make some observations on that matter later, but what steps is the Ministry taking to ensure that smart processes are employed in some of the worst ventures with international partners? Later on, we shall examine some individual cases but, although Ministers are always keen to lay blame at the door of the previous Government, they may be stumbling into some of the same errors themselves.

Despite the progress made in procurement procedures under smart procurement, problems with equipment acquisition continue, especially in terms of programme slippage. Over the summer, the National Audit Office found that the average in-service date delay had increased by four months to 47 months since its previous report was issued in 1998.

For the smart procurement initiative to be a success, the Government must resist the temptation to make changes to programmes for purely political purposes. That is the critical element in the debate. Previous Governments have fallen into that fault, and this Government appear about to do the same in a number of cases.

That is especially true in relation to collaborative programmes. Smart procurement should be about letting industry get on with such programmes. The Government are part of the contract, and must adopt a self-denying ordinance in that regard.

For example, there is the Brimstone missile programme, about which I have some concerns that I hope that the Under-Secretary or the Secretary of State will answer. The Government were rightly keen to trumpet the announcement of new, precision-guided weapons. The Secretary of State did so again today. However, he neglected to mention that the Government appear to be cutting back on the Brimstone programme.

Brimstone is a superb, all-weather, precision-guided missile. It would have been ideal for use in poor weather in places such as Kosovo, and was due for service with the Royal Air Force next year. I think that the due date was March, but I stand to be corrected on that.

However, the Select Committee on Defence has reported that it believes that the RAF will order 25 per cent. fewer missiles than originally planned. Why? In addition, I understand that the Government have asked contractors to delay delivery by up to one year.

The Government say that they want smart procurement to achieve improvements in procurement, but are beginning to take decisions—cutting programmes, introducing delays—that will create a problem for industry.

The Government have an opportunity today to put all those rumours—if they are rumours—to bed. Will the Secretary of State tell us what is correct? Are the Government cutting the programme in terms of numbers of missiles, and are they planning to delay the programme? I am happy to give way at this point—however, I see from the Under-Secretary that he will answer that point specifically in the winding-up speech.

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): The initial starting date for Brimstone was 1990. What happened between 1990 and 1997?

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman, who is chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, knows very well that that programme was delayed. I make no bones about it: the previous Government came to it, went away from it and came back to it again. The Committee's reports illustrated that; they were highly critical, and rightly so. However, when the decision was finally made to go ahead, the industry—in this case I think that it was Marconi, which became BAE—stuck to its part of the bargain.

The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that Brimstone should have been in service a long time ago. I make no excuses for that. The industry has said, "Now we have the firm order, and know what is required. There will be no more messing around from the Government. We will meet the March date in 2001, and we will meet it on cost and capability." My worry is that the report may mean that, just as this most smart of procurements could be proved, it could be chopped away at the knees. Let us not see a repeat of what happened before—that is my main concern.

I turn now to the pressures on the defence budget in general and, more particularly, to certain reports about the Royal Air Force. I hope that the Minister will deal with the recent press reports about how the RAF will lose at least—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State is compressing it, but I suspect that he will have more than he anticipates. It has been reported that the RAF will lose at least three of its front-line squadrons under plans drawn up to claw back some £1.5 billion overspent on defence procurement projects.

Those same reports said that the plans presented to the air force board were to be held back until after the next election, disguised, as they said, as a modernisation of

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the RAF's capabilities to protect the Government—any Government, I suppose, but particularly this one—from charges that they were going back on their commitment not to make further defence cuts.

Intriguingly, on learning of the leak, the Under-Secretary said that the paper was written before the Ministry of Defence's budget was increased in the summer spending review. About a week later, a further leak showed that this paper was not shown to the air force board until its monthly meeting on 2 August—two weeks after the spending review was announced, and when the Government, and the Minister, knew how much money was in the defence budget. So it was not, as he seems to have suggested—I am ready to be corrected—that the Air Force board saw the paper after it knew of the extra money.

Will the Minister also confirm that comments were made at that meeting about reducing a front-line type of aircraft, which would thus reduce cost? That is one way of doing it. Rumours are circulating that it could be the Tornado F3, the Jaguar, or the Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft. *[Interruption.]* I did not leak those documents because I did not have them. Or is the Minister suggestion that we, too, sit on the air force board?

Those documents were in existence and were presented on 2 August, unless the Minister denies that. Now he must explain why he said that they were presented before the budget announcement, not after. That is of great significance. I hope that he will also confirm that no such plans will be implemented.

The Secretary of State mentioned type 45, but he did not talk much about the carriers. Before the summer recess, the Secretary of State announced that the Government intended to go ahead with the order. I welcomed that announcement at the time. There have been discussions about the collaborative Horizon project mess for much the same reasons. We have been around this fence before. However, we still do not actually have the order. We have heard of difficulties from Vosper Thorneycroft.

I hope that, even if the Government cannot announce the order today—as they seem to have chosen to do in the debate on ro-ros—they can at least alleviate the fear and concern in Vosper Thorneycroft, whose work force has lay-off orders. As they have decided that they will spend the money on this project, will they please make the announcement as soon as possible?

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): When the Government make an announcement about the type 45s, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the ships should be capable of launching not just the principal anti-air-missile system missile but also other missiles, particularly Tomahawk? An ability to do this from a ship at sea on the surface would add greatly to our capability of launching cruise attacks, particularly at the moment, when our submarine fleet, which provides the only existing way of launching cruise attacks, is unfortunately in port.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The key point for the Government in the context of the hon. Gentleman's question is: what are we producing these ships for? Obviously they must have the best equipment to deal with possible threats. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Government must take into consideration the requirement that the equipment must not be second rate but must deal with the perceived threat. The threat should be explained, and a ship designed around it.

I will not follow the hon. Gentleman in trying to specify exactly what equipment should be used—that is not my role. That should come from the members of the military who advise the Government. I hope that the Government take that advice on board and provide the best equipment available, not cut-price equipment. We do not want a ship that is incapable of dealing with today's threats, let alone threats in the future.

I ask the Government to get on with that. It would help those who work in the shipyards. More particularly, there is a glaring gap in our capability, which was created by the collapse of the Horizon programme. There will be many who have smiles on their faces, saying, "I told you so". We do not want to go over that again, but I hope that we have learned the lessons from it. The decision on type 45 is the right one, but for goodness' sake, let us get on with it as quickly as possible.

In winding up the debate, will the Minister—or the Secretary of State—inform the House of the latest position on the replacement of faulty rotor heads on Lynx helicopters? On a visit that my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) and I made to a base, we were told worrying stories about how far too many Lynx helicopters were grounded and unable to fly. Pilots are literally queueing up, like a local enthusiasts' air club, to fly Lynx helicopters in rotation, because they cannot get their hours on the Lynx helicopters that they would normally fly. What is the position? Can the Government give us any time scale? How long will it take to remedy the problem? When will those Lynx helicopters be back in the air, as they should be?

The Secretary of State mentioned another procurement project, the SA80. The Kosovo report and others have highlighted the problems and failures of the SA80 over the years. The previous Government, in previous iterations, went through get-well programmes that clearly did not work. The Government have taken a decision, in the light of all the concern about the SA80, to upgrade— *[Interruption.]* If the Secretary of State holds on, I will use my own words; I do not need a prompt from him.

The point is that—despite concerns about the light support weapon as well as the personal weapon, which the Secretary of State knows are widespread—the Government have now decided to go ahead and spend about £80 million on upgrading the SA80. That is about £400 per weapon. The right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have clearly reached that conclusion in the belief that the get-well programme—for that is what it is—will eradicate all the problems that have made the military so concerned about the weapon and so dismissive of its capabilities, to the extent that special forces and others do not want to use it if they can avoid it.

Presumably, the Government's decision will deal with that problem. Therefore they must state beyond any doubt today that the weapon will be as capable as it should be. One of the tests is whether the Government honestly believe that the weapon will reappear on the NATO

approved weapons list after the upgrade. If they do not, they must explain the reason behind the decision to upgrade rather than to go for another weapon.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): Which one?

Mr. Duncan Smith: If the Minister concerned has decided that he needs advice from the Opposition about what weapon to buy, he is being paid far too much for the grade that he is in.

Mr. Brazier: It is common knowledge in the armed forces that the Army wants the Armalite—it has wanted it from the beginning. If we cannot afford a complete replacement, it would be much better to spend the available money on replacing SA80s with Armalites for front-line troops—a partial replacement with a decent weapon—instead of trying to get a little more life out of that hopeless weapon again.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and my only answer is to question the Government yet again. The answer to my hon. Friend's question lies in the Government's answer to mine. They must say at the Dispatch Box today, beyond any doubt, in the winding-up speech if necessary, that the programme will completely eradicate the problems that have beset the weapon. Let us forget the history. We want to know now whether that is the Government's view. If they cannot say that, it opens up the debate about whether another weapon should be entertained for approximately the same cost. They must know what the figures are.

The other part of the equation concerning whether the Government replace or repair the weapon is what will happen to the Nottingham facility in the process. Having placed the contract with BAE Systems, the Government know that most of the work—the only important part of it—is going to Germany to the Heckler and Koch facility, which BAE owns. Are the Government concerned in any way that the Nottingham facility, which is the last serious small arms manufacturer in the country, will simply close?

The Secretary of State's initial response to such questions was that the Government must deal with best value, but in the summer he seemed to twitch slightly, and to suggest to BAE that it could do more work at the Nottingham facility. He may want to correct me, but those were certainly the press reports. I will give way if he wants to tell us his view of the work at that facility—whether it should do more than simply strip the weapons down, and whether it should do some of the work that is going to Germany. Does he believe that, or is he content with the present arrangement with BAE? Obviously, he does not want to answer that question.

Mr. Wilkinson: Before my hon. Friend terminates his catalogue of equipment grief, will he ask the Secretary of State when Tucanos that have been grounded will be airworthy again, and at what additional cost Royal Air Force pupil pilots are being sent to Australia? We were given no clarification of that matter because of the total imbalance in the right hon. Gentleman's speech.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I simply relay my hon. Friend's question to Ministers. I hope that it is another question that the Under-Secretary will answer in his reply, as it deserves an answer. Clearly, the Secretary of State is not prepared to answer my question about the Nottingham facility. Will the Under-Secretary confer with his right hon. Friend and decide exactly what their position is on that facility? The people who work there ought to know whether the Government are rethinking. If they are not, those workers will at least know what their future holds. The Government must make that clear.

On Bowman—as the Secretary of State has decided to run that as part of his re-election campaign—again I make no bones about the fact that the project has gone on far too long. Yet again, I spy the brooding presence of the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence in the corner of the Chamber—as the Secretary of State also found, to his cost.

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend is smiling.

Mr. Duncan Smith: One cannot accuse the Chairman of the Select Committee of smiling—that will ruin his reputation. As he knows, because his reports have stated it many times, and he has long been a member of the Committee, as well as its Chairman for some time, there are huge and inescapable problems with the project. The Government must bear some responsibility for the delays that have taken place. They have been in power nearly four years, and in that time they have stated their belief that the Bowman project, and Archer Communications Systems in particular, were spot on, and that there were no problems.

Even as late as March, the Minister for Defence Procurement said:

> This Government have now put Bowman on a sound footing to ensure that the Armed Forces can have the new radio system that they deserve as soon as possible.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 8 March 2000; Vol. 610, c. 1082-3.]

"Hooray," we all said—but three months later they said, "Enough's enough. Bowman simply has to be scrapped." Now they say that they will reconsider the matter.

It is no good merely blaming the previous Government. We are four years into this Government and we have only just received an unequivocal answer from them. They are going to change the programme. They must take responsibility for the delays of the past four years. If they were so angry about it and thought so little of it, why did they not scrap it when they came to power? They waited all that time, so they must answer that question, too.

Mr. Chidgey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the Bowman project, which was being run by Archer Communications Systems Ltd., which was in my constituency. Does he agree that one of the tragedies of that failure, which predates smart procurement—goodness knows what would have happened under smart procurement—is that not only have we lost the project, but we have lost £200 million of taxpayers' money and 650 highly skilled engineering jobs in my constituency? Those people have moved elsewhere and they will not be replaced.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Clearly, the programme has all the hallmarks of the worst of the excesses that we have come to regret in the annals of the Ministry of Defence. The Select Committee has made that clear time and again.

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The Government now bear some responsibility for the further delays to the programme. They cannot shake that off. If we are prepared to accept that previous Governments bear some responsibility, this Government should stop playing political games and simply admit that they could have got on with it earlier if they thought that it was such a disaster. They did not. In March they were busy reassuring everyone that they had the solution, and then they suddenly said that they did not have it. They have been in power nearly four years and must start to accept some responsibility. I know that that is difficult and that they do not like doing it.

Previous Conservative Governments found out the hard way about international collaboration. Meteor and the A400M illustrate some of the concerns. Certainly, I would like to think that we found it out; posterity has certainly done so. Such programmes are fraught with nightmare problems, and when I mention the wranglings and the setbacks of the Eurofighter programme—who can forget those?—I think that the Secretary of State will agree. The programme has been put back years. I saw the first prototype fly years ago—perhaps the right hon. Gentleman also saw it. It is absurd that we should now be expecting an in-service date as late as 2005. I am not trying to score a political point, because this has happened over a long period, with many nations making absurd declarations about production figures and the like.

The type 45s come on the back of the Horizon failure and the collapse of the multi-role armoured vehicle programme. Those are just three examples. The Government know that there are others, such as the third generation anti-tank weapon. We have gone round the fence many times and I wonder when we shall learn the lessons. Despite those harsh lessons, such multi-nation collaborative programmes remain a serious problem.

I am worried that the Government may be about to repeat past mistakes by participating in some European procurement strategies that run the risk of creating a fortress Europe and alienating others in the NATO alliance. I should like the Secretary of State to respond to my worry that we may be artificially creating two monopolistic blocs that unnecessarily divide NATO—not what British industry wants. The Minister will be aware that, for all the grand talk generally about European defence initiatives and improved European defence capability, by and large, defence spending across Europe is plummeting, although some countries are worse than others.

Mr. Hoon: Given the hon. Gentleman's comments about multinational defence co-operation, would a Conservative Government support the A400M project?

Mr. Duncan Smith: If the Secretary of State allows me about 20 seconds, I shall answer his question. I want to deal with matters in turn. I shall deal with Meteor first, then A400M, because I have serious concerns and should like some answers.

In the summer, it was reported that the Meteor missile proposed for use on the Luftwaffe's Eurofighter combat aircraft did

not meet the German's Air Force operational requirements,

according to the Luftwaffe's chief of air staff planning. I should be grateful if the Minister or the Secretary of State could tell us what the status of that report is, and whether that confusion will create difficulties with the memorandum of understanding for Meteor. Will we start to repeat some of the earlier problems with the European fighter aircraft?

If the controls on Meteor are tight, and if BAE is allowed to run the project, we may be able to deliver Meteor properly. I hope that we do, because the Secretary of State is right that Meteor is critical to the RAF's future capability. I make no bones about that, and it is therefore right to go ahead with that decision.

I have some serious concerns about the A400M, about which there are further problems that are of greater concern. Can the Minister or the Secretary of State tell us about the present position of the contract management for A400M? I have heard that the Germans are now demanding project leadership. Is that the case? Are the reports that there is no money in either the French or German defence budgets for that programme correct? Are the numbers of aircraft to be ordered realistic?

One of the great problems with the Eurofighter was that certain countries inflated their requirement. I do not believe that the United Kingdom did so, or that it has done so with this project. I suspect that if anything, we are at the bottom end of what may be the requirement, but one has to question whether some other countries will end up taking delivery of the numbers that they included in the schedules. That is the key point, because there is a critical mass and the item may become very expensive—much more so than on paper—if countries do not take the required numbers.

The Secretary of State asked me whether I supported the project. I had deep concerns when he announced it. I recognised why he had to make that announcement, but I said that the devil lies in the detail of the answers to the questions. If the right hon. Gentleman is unable to answer those questions or is unsure about those points, he needs to revisit the project. To be fair to all those concerned—from BAE onwards—we should tell them whether we are certain that the project can seriously go ahead. To do anything else would be repeating the same mistakes.

If the right hon. Gentleman can answer those questions, and if he is sure that there are no problems and that everything will be sorted out, he may well be right to go ahead with the project—otherwise we shall repeat earlier mistakes. Therefore the answer to his question is yes, I will support the project—so long as he can say that the numbers, and the other points that I made, are not a problem.

In the preamble to the OCCAR convention, signed in September 1998, the four participating Governments—France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom—seemed to lay the foundations for a fortress Europe in defence procurement, stating that

a strengthening of their co-operation in defence equipment will contribute to the establishment of a European security and defence identity and is a practical step towards the creation of a European armaments agency".

Those foundations are built on article 6, which states:

When meeting the requirements of its armed forces, each Member State shall give preference to equipment in whose development it has participated within OCCAR".

That is worrying. The requirement seems to be at odds with the whole point of smart procurement—the procurement of the best equipment at best value and the most competitive price. If such a political requirement is introduced into that process, it will create nightmare problems for smart procurement.

Surely, procurement for the armed forces cannot be devoted to any grand European design; it should be about the best that is available. There should not be a fortress Europe versus a fortress United States. That would be a grave mistake, as the Secretary of State should be aware, and as British industry would tell him. I hope that the Government will agree that projects should be set, as far as possible, according to benchmark standards of interoperability with the best in NATO. Often, but not always, the best happens to be the USA. As we saw in Kosovo, the USA is best in certain aspects.

The key must be that we in NATO can operate in conjunction with those with other equipment. That requires us to look more widely than simply focusing on Europe. The wisdom of the approach has been seen in Kosovo. I hope that the Secretary of State, or the Minister when he responds, will deal with how the Government intend to square such a grand political design with the reality that the armed forces want best value.

The Government have referred to the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, and I want to raise some points that have been raised many times, mostly by the Select Committee. I thought that the Government's first attempt at the partial privatisation of DERA was almost a fiasco. It was attacked by more or less everyone, not just the Select Committee, and the industry and the United States made their views clear. Despite the outcry following the Government's first consultation paper, instead of producing a genuinely new proposal that might have squared the problem, they simply seemed to go round the fence one more time and make a few corrections.

Questions still remain on many key issues. For example, exactly who will be allowed to buy shares in the privatised companies? There is an issue of national security. What will be the limitations on new company activities? What will be the relationship between the privatised and the retained parts of DERA? Even now, the industry complains about the thorny problem of intellectual property rights.

The Secretary of State will know that DERA is crucial to the process involved in any high-tech project, yet the Government are now putting that at risk. The United States is, of course, an ally with which we have had a long and fruitful history of successful collaborative projects, and the relationship is improving all the time. Technology transfer and exchange are now better than they have been for a considerable time. Harrier, Apache—which the Secretary of State mentioned—Trident and the joint strike fighter are all programmes in which Britain and the United States are collaborating, or have collaborated, with great mutual success.

The JSF is a prime example of how the DERA programme begins to hurt. I remind the Secretary of State of its huge potential not only for BAE, but for industry across the board. Already questions have begun to emerge. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman. Whoever is carrying that bleeper should have turned it off before they brought it into the Chamber.

Mr. Duncan Smith: How will the United States transfer the key technologies that are relevant to that programme, as BAE will tell them time and again that stealth technologies are critical? There is no joint programme if BAE does not have access to those critical technologies. Yet I hope and believe that BAE will tell the Secretary of State what it has told me: it is deeply worried after conversations with the Americans, who are saying that they have no idea about what will happen to places such as Boscombe Down, or what the relationship will be, and that they are loth to make commitments on those technology transfer issues, all of which will be damning.

If the Minister thinks that the Americans are absolutely on-side, I must tell him that I do not think so. The new Deputy Secretary of Defence described the relationship a few days ago as constructive and workable, but went beyond those diplomatic words in adding that a number of detailed issues inevitably remained to be resolved. The point is that partial privatisation is immensely complicated and detailed: the devil is not just in the detail, it is the detail. The problems have not been resolved yet, and the Select Committee report goes to the heart of that.

The Secretary of State and the Minister have an opportunity to respond properly to that report—not in the patronising manner of the response I read the other day—by saying how they will deal with the problems. If JSF fails because of the partial privatisation of DERA, neither the industry nor the country will forgive the Government.

The Secretary of State did not refer to some matters, vital in procurement terms, that go way beyond the big money programmes for frigates, aircraft, missiles and so on. I refer to small things that we rather take for granted, but which affect the daily life of service men and women. These might be said to be silly things, but they are important—soap, lavatory paper, vaccines and accommodation. Who could forget the substandard tent accommodation identified by my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) during deployment in Kosovo in winter? We may forget such problems, but they are just as important as failures on big procurement programmes. They affect soldiers, sailors and airmen. How are such problems being resolved, and how deeply have they bitten? When people decide to leave the forces early, those are the straws that break the camel's back.

Defence exports are important to everyone, particularly the 400,000 people who work in the industry and their dependants, and the hon. Members who represent them. We have heard endlessly about legislation on export controls, but can the Minister tell us what that will mean for industry, when it will come forward, what it will contain and how deeply it will bite on industry's ability to deal with future export possibilities?

No one wants programmes to get into difficulties or produce the wrong equipment. Our defence would suffer from that, which is why procurement is hugely important. By its nature, defence procurement is always fraught with difficulties that do not exist in commercial contracts. We are always quick to point out failings at the Ministry of Defence, with people saying that equipment could be

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bought commercially. But there are plenty of times when that cannot be done, or when commercial products require more work.

It is inevitable that mistakes will sometimes be made because procurement has been overdone, but we are dealing with equipment likely to be used in some of the worst environments that it is possible to imagine, such as slit trenches half-filled with water, in freezing Arctic conditions or at high altitude in aircraft in combat. Whatever it takes, the Ministry of Defence must deal with equipment that will work in those circumstances. No one would forgive the Ministry for choosing an option that, although cheap, did not work when most needed, as has too often happened.

We expected answers from the Government on many of the issues that I have raised. Instead we heard a statement that should have been made separately on a particular procurement project, then a party political broadcast by the Secretary of State. No doubt that was inserted in his programme by Alastair Campbell, who is fed up because the Secretary of State has not yet done enough party politicking. Perhaps every time the right hon. Gentleman stands up in future, we can expect to hear the usual four and a half yards of political nonsense from the Government, rather than their dealing with the issues and problems. I regret that the Secretary of State took that approach today, but we are running towards an election which Labour will lose. Every dog must have his day, and I am happy to give the Secretary of State the opportunity to play silly political games while I look forward to taking over the problems and dealing with them after the election.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is now an opportunity for Back Benchers to have their day. Rather more wish to speak than would be successful in catching my eye if everyone took the full allocation of time available. I therefore appeal for brevity so that those who have been here throughout the debate may have an opportunity to speak.

4.5 pm

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): I am not sure whether to feel flattered by the reference by the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) to my brooding presence. I am not so much brooding as sitting here amused and bemused. One great advantage of having sat for ever on the Select Committee on Defence is that one goes round the houses time and again. Whenever the hon. Gentleman or his colleagues scream "foul" or "foul-up", I can say, "Tories—1981 and 1987."

The hon. Gentleman has at least enough humility occasionally to lapse into fairness, though that owes more to his early career at *Jane's*—incredibly objective—and in the Army than to his present role. The hon. Gentleman must have seen many foul-ups, and must realise—even if not all his colleagues do—that fouling up in procurement is almost par for the course. One can only hope that smart procurement will minimise the foul-ups, which no Government have, as yet, managed to do.

I did not bounce to my feet to ask questions about roll on/roll off ferries. I find it amusing that those who did all the screaming have departed the Chamber, leaving those of us who remain less chance to make our speeches. The incandescence of their rage lasted just the length of a statement. They may read what I have said.

I am delighted that we are debating procurement. The Defence Committee did a good job on the four reports relevant to the debate, and much information with which we may evaluate the Government's performance has arisen from the Committee's deliberations. I was pleased to hear the Government say that the debate on defence procurement would not proceed until the Defence Committee had had a chance to evaluate documentation and produce our report.

In addition to the four reports tagged for this debate—on the OCCAR convention, on the future of DOWRY, on major procurement and on the appointment of the chief scientific adviser—I should like to tag personally yesterday's report on the lessons of Kosovo, which contains a substantial section on procurement. I should also mention the report that we published a few months ago on the Government's annual reporting cycle.

The Government spend nearly £10 billion on procurement and spares, which shows how often we should debate those matters. One of the most delicate phrases that I have ever heard used about Ministry of Defence procurement was in our procurement report which said that its annual deeds record over 20 years had been less than glorious. Far worse could have been said, but we must recognise that any Government who try to develop a smart procurement policy will find no panacea. Anyone who claimed that we could save so many billion pounds after two years—or five or 10—would be a born optimist. So much can blow a Government, and their Ministry of Defence, off course.

I can speak with a degree of detachment because I have opposed my own party's policy for at least as long as I have opposed the Opposition's. The Defence Committee is evil to everyone. We have had much more time in which to hone our skills by attacking the Conservatives, but time will tell on that. In fairness, some good starts have been made, and the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green mentioned the establishment of the Defence Procurement Agency, smart procurement, public-private partnerships and private finance initiatives. All that is an attempt to change the culture of decision making at the Ministry of Defence and in its weapons procurement process.

The Government have been courageous—it is difficult to be courageous—where they have been prepared to take dramatic decisions: on the cancellation of Horizon, the common new generation frigate, what is now Skynet 5, the medium-range Trigat anti-tank missile, Bowman and perhaps more to come. That was absolutely right. It took the previous Government a long time, understandably, to change their mind and to say that the time had come to dump a programme. The move to AWACS is an example of where decisions must be made.

I must say something about ro-ro ferries. I should love to have, and perhaps the Defence Committee will have,

access to the legal advice that the Department was given. In evidence to us under the section entitled "Military Capability", which states:

> The RORO service can be used across a full range of missions and military tasks that require deployment of UK forces into theatre through a seaport of disembarkation. It is not the intention to use the service in "battle conditions" but the ships may need to transit warlike zones and maybe under escort as part of a task force.

Perhaps the sailors on them will be Royal Naval reserves. I should love to see whether the Government have taken the right legal advice. So much is at stake. I cannot imagine the French falling for an approach such as this. I hope that this will be closely monitored—not by the Mickey Mouse private investigators captured in Cuba but by serious investigators, to ensure that our competitors are playing by the rules. I hope that we shall have an explanation on that in due course.

The report on Kosovo was published yesterday. It was not an easy report for the Committee to write. I am rabidly pro-NATO. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green will know that I wrote three great tomes in the early 1990s which he as marketing manager did not manage to sell. The books were grossly overpriced and undermarketed, but they were very good. I am a devotee of NATO and it was particularly difficult for me to chair a Committee that was so critical of NATO.

I feel strongly that the only way to get improvements is by criticism. If the Government have any reason to dissent from our analysis or if we have made any factual errors, I look forward to their reply in due course. The Committee was absolutely right to say:

> Operation Allied Force does, we believe, demand close and careful examination for the lessons it has to teach us about the role of NATO in maintaining security and stability in Europe, and about the types of operation in which it may in the future be involved. NATO's involvement in Kosovo has aroused extensive and sometimes passionate debate, and been the subject of intense scrutiny.

The report continued:

> Despite the imbalance in military potency between the Alliance and Milosevic's forces, Operation Allied Force proved to be a more risky venture than many anticipated.

We went on to say why, and that if we embark on such a venture again, we should learn the lessons swiftly and well.

I was a little disappointed with some of the press reports. There was a little too much publicity. We did not criticise the Prime Minister personally. "Grovel, grovel", as Ron Brown said after he was thrown out of the House of Commons. The Prime Minister did not preside over the North Atlantic Council. We pointed out that the need to maintain Alliance unity caused unforced errors. We acknowledged the United Kingdom to be the driving force in maintaining the determination of the Alliance to see the job through to a conclusion. Unfortunately, that enthusiasm was not shared by all our allies.

Wars test not just the resolve and competence of decision makers, and the support of parliamentarians; they test the quality of military personnel and of the equipment that is procured for them. The decisions made today are decisions that our men and women will fight with 20 years from now. One of the problems—here I lapse temporarily into partisanship, but it is necessary to do so—is that many of the procurement decisions that we identify as having been less than successful were inherited from the last Government. If a war is fought 15 years from now, the same criticism can be made by an ageing Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, still awaiting his opportunity and then facing being bypassed as many 65-year-old Opposition Members awaiting their chance are.

To prove my decency I now turn my criticism to an invisible role, next to the very visible Under-Secretary. I am disappointed in the way in which the Royal Air Force performed. I am not talking about the personnel. We revere them, correctly. I take no comfort from the fact that we were the fourth largest supplier of aircraft in the conflict. I would take satisfaction if we had been the second, behind the United States, and not behind France and Italy and just in front of a clutch of other countries. We can do better.

Admittedly, the Tornado and Harrier were good aircraft in their day. They are still useful, but are getting a little venerable. I fear that the poor kit that was procured some time ago did not properly maximise the RAF contribution. We said:

> The most serious shortcoming in UK capabilities shown-up by the air campaign was the lack of precision-guided weapons capable of being used in all weathers against static and mobile targets.

When we go through the lack of security and all the errors it is clear that one of the problems was the TIALD integration on the Tornado GR4 upgrade. That was a disaster. It should have been in years ago. The GR4 version was not ready for use in Kosovo. The initial starting date was 1993. Delays now total 63 months. The Government cannot accept more than a modicum of blame for that. There was a lack of GPS-guided munitions in Kosovo. The spending review promised funds, but much of that was not addressed by the last Government. On anti- armour air-to-air surface munitions, Brimstone was 10 years late, so the RAF had to rely on unguided cluster bombs. Brimstone's initial starting date was 1990.

There was a lack of secure air-to-air communications. The Royal Air Force could not speak securely to its American allies. Nothing has been done and nothing announced. Phoenix has been a great success—that is, it was promised in the 1980s, hoped for in the 1990s and at least in this millennium we have seen this drone operational.

There was insufficient sealift. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the Defence Committee produced reports complaining about the collapse of the Merchant Marines. There was insufficient airlift. The Government put a lot of faith in the C-130J. It was not their fault; the last Government were still awaiting delivery. The SA80 was not all the Government's fault; it was the fault of the last Government. The Horizon was not this Government's fault. They cancelled it. The Government took a good decision over the BVRAAM and I applaud them for their choice. So when we look at procurement failures, let us be reasonably fair.

In the conclusion of our Kosovo report we said:

> Overall, despite the heroic efforts of UK aircrew and support staff, we must conclude that the UK contribution to the air campaign, in terms of actual fire power rather than support, was somewhat disappointing.

That was hardly a devastating criticism, but the contribution was unsatisfactory and no blame attaches to the personnel.

Our NATO partners have little to be pleased about, except the United States. The defence capability initiative may improve matters. The OCCAR treaty may

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improve matters. I hope that the treaty was signed on collaboration in the European defence industry. That might help. The Helsinki headline goals may help, but spending by our European partners is pretty miserly and they need to do far more, if the Europeans are to be taken seriously as partners to the United States.

It is important that BAE Systems survives in an increasingly competitive world. Recently, I learned that the entire value of the United States aircraft and aerospace industry is only 17 per cent. of the value of Bill Gates and Microsoft. That is a sign of the problems the US industry is facing.

I want better co-operation in Europe. I am an atlanticist, politically—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry that there is no additional time for the Chairman of the Select Committee.

4.20 pm

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I shall not detain the House for an hour as the previous Front-Bench speakers have done.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): The hon. Gentleman is only entitled to a quarter of an hour.

Mr. Keetch: I must correct the Minister. The Liberal Democrat spokesman is entitled to an hour, but I have given my commitment to the Deputy Speaker and to the Whips that I shall not be using the full hour—not least because I want to ensure that my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) and Back Benchers from other parties have the opportunity to speak.

In a thorough—if slightly long—speech, the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) paid tribute to Sir Robert Walmsley, as do I. However, the hon. Gentleman rightly criticised the contribution made by the Secretary of State at the start of the debate. The hon. Gentleman pointed out that the right hon. Gentleman's speech was a mixture of a statement and a party political broadcast. Furthermore, I am surprised that the Secretary of State could not find the time to remain in the Chamber—to listen not, perhaps, to me, but to the important contribution made by the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George).

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Secretary of State was just passing through.

Mr. Keetch: Indeed.

In relation to the ro-ro order, I hope that the Under-Secretary—who is in the Chamber—will answer the specific points that were raised. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) asked whether details of the successful bids would be placed in the Library. May we have a simple yes or no answer to that question about the landing ships?

Dr. Moonie: The matter is confidential—as has always been the case.

Mr. Keetch: We have a "No" to the first question. Let us see how we get on with the others.

Mr. Burnett: Does my hon. Friend agree that we are discussing the spending of public money for which the Government must be accountable and that the way to bring them to account is to determine whether, by their own definition, they have achieved value for money?

Mr. Keetch: I agree with my hon. Friend. Some of the orders for those ships were placed overseas and I think that the Chairman of the Select Committee shares the concerns expressed by Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members that that is wrong. We should have more information than the Government may be prepared to give.

My second point relates to the Clyde. Can the floating dock order be brought forward to save jobs there?

Thirdly, if it is true, as was suggested by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), that the Secretary of State's decisions about these orders—albeit not his actual words—were broadcast on the BBC website before he made his statement to the House, the right hon. Gentleman should return to the House this evening and apologise.

We should never debate defence without stating our belief that the men and women of the British armed forces are among the finest in the world. In all manner of places throughout the world, it has been proved time and again that, when military action must be taken to resolve conflict or to enforce peace, the UK is more than capable of taking the lead and setting the example. This year, that has been proved yet again by Operation Palliser in Sierra Leone.

The quality of our armed forces enables the UK to fulfil our commitments to protect, enforce and promote the rules of the international society to which we subscribe. The best procurements we make for our armed forces are the men and women who serve in them.

We shall be holding another defence debate next week. These defence debates are rather like buses—there are none for months and then two come along at once.

A delicate balance is involved in controlling expenditure on defence procurement. We must ensure that Britain's armed forces are equipped to meet the nation's defence obligations both in peacetime and during conflict. Our armed forces need to be prepared to act alongside our allies in extremely hazardous environments as part of collective defence and security operations. They must have the means successfully to participate in peacekeeping activities anywhere in the world. If they are not sufficiently equipped, the UK's ability to project power—to protect, enforce and promote democracy—will be seriously undermined. As a nation, we will not be living up to the responsibilities brought by a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations.

Defence procurement is about how the Government can best prepare those who serve in our armed forces for the extremely difficult jobs that we sometimes ask them to do. It is also about getting best value for the taxpayer. How can we judge correctly the relationship between quality, speed of delivery and value? Under the previous Government—as we have already heard—projects such as the Bowman system dragged on for a decade, and misjudgments were made time and again. As the shadow Secretary of State rightly pointed out, the Bowman contract should have been dealt with sooner. It is possible to acquire affordable equipment, deliver it quickly and still ensure the highest quality. We should look to our allies, because they have often performed better than us in that regard.

Affordable quality equipment does not have to take decades to arrive. Speed, quality and value can coexist; it is the job of Government to ensure that they do so. With that in mind, we welcome the goals underlying the Government's smart procurement initiative. Any initiative that ensures faster, cheaper and better procurement should be welcomed.

However, if smart procurement is to be more than just another soundbite, it needs to be testable. The report of the Select Committee stated that there were early signs of improvement; perhaps they are the "green shoots of recovery"—perhaps not. The Committee also concluded that there is a long way to go. Costs and delays continue to escalate. The average in-service date delay has risen from 43 months in 1998 to 47 months in 1999. As for making procurement cheaper, 13 projects have exceeded their original cost approvals, and cost overruns have increased by £22 million since 1998.

This week, the Minister announced in a written answer that smart procurement will save us £2 billion over the 10 years between 1998 and 2008. How does he know? In the light of the figures and of the worsening performance trends, will the Minister share with us the brand of fiscal mathematics that makes such savings possible, let alone likely?

Surely, if procurement is becoming slower and increasingly expensive, that does not add up to smart procurement. Where are the green shoots? How do the Government measure the success of smart procurement? By which criteria do they claim—as the Secretary of State did this afternoon—that it will save £2 billion? Parliament should be told. Smart procurement needs smart government, and until the Government publish the criteria by which they assess those figures, it is nothing more than a soundbite.

I do not doubt the height of the mountain that the Government have to climb. There have been decades of mismanagement—as Members on both sides of the House must accept. For example, in 1968, the Downey report recommended that 15 per cent. of development spending should be disbursed before full development began. It is obvious that the costs of the whole project, and not just the early costs, should be taken into account when making design decisions. In 1987, a Ministry of Defence working party recommended the implementation of the Downey report. However, the Conservative Government did not fully implement it.

On the Challenger 2 project, Vickers came in 30 months behind schedule and was fined a measly £3 million—only 0.13 per cent. of the contract. As a result, the MOD incurred costs of £39 million, plus the lack of operational capability. Why were those costs not pursued? Why were much larger penalties not imposed?

Furthermore, in 1994, options for a follow-on buy were taken up before the tanks had demonstrated their reliability. In 1995, it was then found that they were not reliable and it required two more years of work to bring them up to standard.

On the contracts that are the responsibility of the Labour Government, the expeditionary strategy, outlined in the strategic defence review, relies on the introduction of two new aircraft carriers to replace the ageing Invincible class. For Britain to have a key role in ensuring international peace and security in the future, it is essential to increase our capacity to deploy. The carriers are vital for that. Each carrier is capable of accommodating up to 50 fixed-wing aircraft, and will give a tremendous boost to the extent to which the UK can operate worldwide either as part of a coalition or independently.

Let us examine those aircraft, as any aircraft carrier is only as good as the aircraft that it carries. There are possibly half a dozen aircraft which we could choose to go on the new carriers, including the joint strike fighter, the F18, a version of Eurofighter and perhaps an advanced version of Harrier. Considering the downward spiral in the Government's performance in meeting procurement deadlines, it is a rather unnerving thought that, if the aircraft chosen is not developed in time, the whole carrier project could be in doubt.

The chief of defence procurement has identified 2005 as the deadline for the decision on the carrier-borne aircraft. However, considering the current state of procurement, if an aircraft is chosen by that time, can we really be confident that it will be delivered to coincide with the carriers? We should not forget that 15 of the 25 on-going projects, or 60 per cent. of all procurement programmes, are at least three years overdue. It is therefore possible that future carriers, perhaps designed with joint strike fighters, will face overruns, which means that the carriers will stand idly by with no aircraft to use. Even worse, we may have to redesign the carriers to operate a different type of aircraft. I hope that we never have to answer those questions in a future debate.

I hope that the type 45 destroyer will succeed. With the principal anti-air-missile system, the type 45 will provide defence at sea against anti-ship missiles, and support for troops on the ground. Most importantly, the proposed capability of the type 45 to accommodate vertical launchers that could carry cruise and Tomahawk missiles would provide the fleet with a weapons capacity that would do a great deal to equip the UK to meet the challenges of the future. As I said when intervening on the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, given the demise of the submarine-launch Tomahawk fleet, I hope that the type 45s will have the capacity to carry that missile.

Recent evidence suggests that all is not well with the type 45 contracts. Vosper Thornycroft is threatening to make 650 workers redundant and withdraw from large-scale warship building in the UK as a result of confusion over the workshare agreement. Will the Minister assure the House that the workshare agreement set out in the alliance heads of agreement remains the basis of contractual negotiations? Will he also assure the House that there will be fair and equal allocation of work between the prime contractors and other partners and subsidiaries?

What is worse than the uncertain regime of smart procurement is procurement delivered against no regime whatever. The Defence Procurement Agency will shortly place an order for a theatrewide area communications network system, which is a sophisticated and essential development to meet the future needs of our Army. On 10 October, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Defence, asking several questions about that project, but he has not yet seen fit to reply. I shall therefore explain the position to the Minister. The provisions of the system have been subject to competition and tender through the DPA's

[Mr. Keetch]

electronics department. Currently, two major organisations, Racal Avionics and Cogent Defence Systems, are in the frame to supply the system.

Dr. Moonie: The hon. Gentleman is wrong.

Mr. Keetch: If I am wrong, as the Minister says, I am happy to give way to him. Perhaps he will explain why the Secretary of State has not had the courtesy to reply to my letter of two weeks ago to explain why I am wrong.

Mr. Burnett: My hon. Friend has given a cogent list of delays. Is he going to get on to the matter of delays in the construction of landing platform docks?

Mr. Keetch: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but to ensure that other Members have an opportunity to contribute to our debate, I cannot cover the whole range of delays.

I want to return to the important system that I was discussing which will be carried in the rear of a fleet of military cargo vehicles. It appears that the DPA has released the purchasing authority for the provision of the new vehicles, and that contract is worth some £8 million to the companies supplying the electronic hardware. In other words, we are tendering on the hardware, but not the vehicles that will carry it. It has emerged that both possible contractors want to use the same vehicle, the Duro, which is manufactured in a country that is not in the European Union, not in NATO and not even in the United Nations. I am referring to the Swiss company, Bucher-Guyer.

The development of the vehicle was subsidised by the Swiss Government and it is not in service with any other army. Are we going to buy a piece of equipment that will be carried in Swiss trucks, not UK-manufactured vehicles? Why was no UK, NATO or EU supplier asked to tender for the vehicle and why did the Government choose it? Was there any tender competition at all? The British Army has a system generally described as the green fleet, which means that every vehicle must undergo arduous programmes of development and trial. There is benchmarking for reliability in battlefield situations, and the trials cost millions of pounds and can take several years. All the vehicles are fully supported with logistics and spares, are part of an integrated fleet and can be maintained effectively at a level of operational readiness. Vehicles produced by British companies, such as Land Rover, Leyland Daf, Alvis and others, could fulfil the role for which the Duro vehicle is being purchased.

How can the Government justify a potential requirement to support a new, unknown vehicle that is untested, untried and unproven for service in the British Army green fleet and which will be entrusted to carry one of the Army's most important communications? I am compelled to ask that, if has not already done so, the Secretary of State undertake a full and thorough investigation into why that vehicle will be purchased by the British Army, as we do not regard that as smart procurement.

We must ensure that our procurement strategy provides the very best for our armed forces. As far as implementing procurement strategy that is fit for the 21st century is concerned, we believe that smart procurement is a step in the right direction, but a substantial improvement must be made if it is to mean anything at all. Procurement is not getting faster or cheaper and, regarding the standard of delivery and equipment, it is not getting better.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): The hon. Gentleman has made some important points. One problem is that we look at all those programmes, but not at the philosophy of the procurement or acquisition itself. Does the hon. Gentleman think that there is any reason why contractors who make things that go on platforms, but not the platforms themselves, should not be prime contractors? That is an important matter. What does the hon. Gentleman think about partnering as a means of procurement that can exclude competition?

Mr. Keetch: I want to ensure that our armed forces have the best equipment. Indeed, some things that have been suggested today may bring that about, as long as they can be seen to provide what they are meant to do. My concern, especially about Duro, is that we are likely to purchase a vehicle that no one else has apart from the Swiss. It was developed with Swiss Government money and there was no way that Land Rover or anyone else could get involved in tendering. Clearly, that should not be the case.

Mr. Burnett: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Keetch: Yes, for the last time.

Mr. Burnett: Does my hon. Friend agree that the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) made a very good point? Direct contracts save money because main contractors will invariably take something out of a sub-contract. Furthermore, and importantly, the degree of monitoring that the main contractor performs on the subcontractor's work is incredibly inefficient and expensive.

Mr. Keetch: As always, my hon. Friend makes an important contribution.

We must make sure that the British armed forces are provided with resources to retain their excellent reputation for serving the interests of the UK and the international community of which we are part. It is now up to the Government to fulfil their part of the bargain and serve the interests of those who work in the armed forces by ensuring that faster, cheaper and better procurement translates from soundbite into positive action. I have asked specific questions tonight, and I had hoped that the Secretary of State would be here to hear them. As he is not, I look forward to the eventual reply of the Under-Secretary.

4.39 pm

Mr. Alan Campbell (Tynemouth): I hoped to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to raise some issues about naval procurement, but I now have the opportunity to respond to what the Secretary of State said earlier. I speak as someone who has a constituency interest in the defence and maritime industries, but also as the chair of the north-east maritime and offshore cluster—a role for which I receive no remuneration.

I welcome the decision to place the alternative landing ships logistic order with Swan Hunter on Tyneside. It is excellent news for the north-east and a huge boost not only for the river but for the whole region. It is a tribute to the hard work and investment of the owner of Swan Hunter, the management, and of the work force. It is also just reward for the efforts made across the community in the north-east by employers, employees and trade unions—especially the General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union and the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union—and political representatives from the region, who have campaigned so hard for the orders. I am delighted with the way in which the Government have responded to those calls.

Mr. Burnett: I do not want to be churlish, but when was the last time that Swan Hunter built a warship?

Mr. Campbell: In the early 1990s. The failure of the previous Government to put work into Swan Hunter and Tyneside led to the collapse of Swan Hunter. It is only due to the faith of the new owner and his investment that Swan Hunter is the success that it is today.

The decision on landing ships, which I welcome, is about value for money. It is in the interests of taxpayers, as it should be, but it is also an act of faith in the north-east by this Labour Government. I say in response to the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) that it is an act of faith in the north-east which stands in direct contrast to the active betrayal of Swan Hunter by the Conservative Government.

I see that the shadow Defence Secretary is no longer in his place. He stumbled today in remembering the name of Swan Hunter. He really should not have done so because he was a member of the House when his Government were responsible for killing off Swan Hunter in the first place. Now it falls to the Labour Government to bring military orders back to that yard. However, even as we do so, there is a question mark over future orders because we do not know the effect of the £16 billion of cuts that would be made by—let us hope that it does not happen—a future Conservative Government. Until the Conservatives start to put some figures into the public domain, there must be question marks against such orders.

We are constantly told that the Government will be judged not by their words but by their actions. That is why the ALSL announcement is important. It begins the process of reinvesting in defence shipbuilding on Tyneside after decades of under-investment by the previous Government. It brings the very real prospect that a warship will be built again on Tyneside. That is not merely an economic boost for the region; it is a psychological boost. I welcome it.

I have said from the outset that the work on the roll on/roll off ferries should be done in British yards, and I stand by that today, so I can welcome only in part the announcement today. But if we are honest we will admit that the route chosen for the procurement of the vessels meant that it was likely that, if the decision had been made earlier this year, which could have happened, all the work would have gone abroad. We should reflect on that and on the jobs that will be created at Harland and Wolff. It was a difficult decision for the Government, and I know for a fact that the Secretary of State and the Minister for Defence Procurement have done a great deal within the rules to keep the work in British yards.

I am all in favour of looking at new ways of procuring vessels and equipment. After all, we are defenders not only of the nation but of the interests of the taxpayer. When the procurement process begins, the designation of vessels is crucial. It cannot be too difficult to ensure that Ministry of Defence ships, including ferries, are designated as warships. We know that it happens in other countries. By doing so, we could avoid many of the problems that we have faced.

Ministry of Defence orders are an important part of the future of shipbuilding in the north-east. They are a valuable way of boosting public spending in the region and creating employment both directly and indirectly. They are also a way of ensuring quality and value for money, not only for taxpayers but for service personnel. However, MOD orders cannot be a cushion to protect British yards from facing up to some hard questions about competition with Europe. I accept that there is a case for looking at hidden subsidies for overseas yards and I am sure that the MOD takes it seriously, but surely subsidies cannot account for the differences in competitiveness between some of the yards in Europe and some of our yards.

We shall be competitive only if we are given the opportunity to compete for quality orders. Only with continuity of orders can we move towards economies of scale. The Government are committed to building about 30 warships in the next 15 to 20 years. It is important that, where possible, orders are brought forward to create a firmer and more secure context for investment and continuity of employment, especially for apprentices.

I welcome the award of the contracts to Swan Hunter. We are making progress in the region. Companies and agencies are working together increasingly in the way that I called for in a debate on 4 April. The clusters that are operating on the Tyne are the way forward, as is greater co-operation between yards to maximise for the whole of the United Kingdom the benefits of the orders that we receive. We also need a Government who are committed, as this Government are, to backing our efforts.

I extend to the Secretary of State an invitation to visit Tyneside in the near future to see the excellent work that we are doing. There is a long way to go to secure shipbuilding and ship repair on Tyneside, but the award of the contracts today is a welcome boost for that process, and I am grateful for it.

4.47 pm

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): The hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell) spoke up for his constituency and constituency interests—quite right, too, and well spoken, if I may say so. We all speak for our constituency interests. I have on occasions spoken up for my constituency company, Basys Technology, which operates in defence procurement and for another local firm, Vosper Thornycroft. However, on this occasion, I want to look at defence procurement on a top-down rather than bottom-up basis.

Defence procurement is an important issue—an issue of life or death for the soldier, sailor or airman, or even for a nation. It is one of the oldest issues that nations have had to face. It goes back to the creation of gunpowder and right through to the creation of nuclear weapons. It goes right back to the time of the Trojan horse and through to the Enigma code breaker. It is a crucial issue. It is vital

[Mr. Peter Viggers]

that we should give our forces a military edge. After 50 years of tranquillity in Great Britain, it is important that we should not relax. I point out that that is 50 years of tranquillity in Great Britain, not the United Kingdom, because Northern Ireland has been disrupted by violence in that period.

I believe that the Ministry of Defence is working on the basis that there will be no war without three years' warning. That did not apply in the case of Kosovo. We were within a few days of mobilising reserves and going into what might have been an extremely bloody ground campaign. It is crucial that we should lift our eyes above parochial and constituency issues and ensure that we give our troops what it is our duty to give them—the best possible equipment.

There are enormous complications in defence procurement. First, there is the size of the budgets. We are dealing with numbers that have so many noughts on the end that it is difficult for many people to contemplate the size of the budgets.

Then there is the complexity of the issues. To put it most simply, a naval gun costs only a fraction of the through-life cost of the programme. The shells used by that gun will cost much more than the gun itself. We have to concentrate on through-life costs rather than on initial procurement costs.

Another complicating factor is multinationality, and that applies whether we are co-operating with the United States or with our European allies. It is an extra political complication. I welcome the six-nation framework that was signed in July 1998, a letter of intent that was intended to bring six nations together to co-operate more closely and to harmonise their defence procurement.

The final point of complication is the transience of Ministers, decision makers and armed forces personnel. Armed forces personnel are experts in their own field, but they serve in a particular posting in Whitehall to deal with a defence procurement matter for probably two and a half years or so. None of the five Defence Ministers has any defence experience and only one of them has been in post since May 1997. All the rest are transients and have had to try to pick up the threads of enormously complicated issues in a comparatively short time. My message is that we should try to keep defence procurement simple, clear and honest.

Delay is an enemy and the best is the enemy of the good. The people involved in defence procurement try to put extra knobs, whistles and bells on different equipment. They find it difficult to do what the manufacturers of television sets, radios or other mass-produced items have to do, which is to freeze a design and produce a large number. There is a tendency among Ministry of Defence planners to keep evolving the design, which means that it becomes more complicated and expensive. That results in delay after delay.

Why do we need to be concerned about defence procurement? In the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and at other international gatherings where people discuss defence, a series of numbers has become accepted—100, 60 and 15. If the United States puts in 100 per cent. of the effort, all the European NATO countries combined put in 60 per cent. of the effort. However, the European countries receive only 15 per cent. of the benefit from that effort. In other words, all that the European continental NATO allies receive is 15 per cent. of the effect of the United States defence procurement budget—15 per cent. of the bangs for your bucks that the Americans get. That is a deeply serious issue, not only because of the imbalance that is created, but because of the nature of American society. It is disturbing that only about 8 per cent. of United States citizens have passports and have ever travelled abroad. I understand that George W. Bush has travelled abroad only three times, despite the fact that his father was ambassador to China and to the United Nations and later the head of the Central Intelligence Agency. However, that is better than Ronald Reagan who had travelled abroad only once before he was elected President, and that was to Taiwan. The United States is a very insular country. Mentions of foreign policy issues are very rare in the Gore-Bush election debates. It is only after an individual is elected President that he starts to take an interest in foreign affairs.

We in this country are used to the standard schoolroom projection of the world—the Mercator projection with the United Kingdom in the middle and the other countries spread out on both sides. In the United States, north and south America are in the middle of the map, and we must remember that a third of the population of the United States—those in California and on the west coast—look to the west. They do not necessarily look to Europe primarily; they look west to Japan, China, Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines. The United States has been an amazingly staunch ally and I pay it tribute for that. No one could be a finer ally of Europe. However, it would be a mistake to continue to take that fact for granted. We must put more effort into defence procurement and ensure that European defences are stronger, and we must do that without in any way weakening NATO.

A further contributory strand in such thinking about the United States is that it would be a mistake to imagine that the most powerful country in the world will sit by supinely and watch the actions of rogue states—or, to be more accurate, rogue Governments—in countries such as Iran, Iraq, Libya and North Korea without seeking to deploy national missile defence. The planned earliest date for that deployment is 2005, and we will delude ourselves if we think that the Americans will not plan to deploy it. That will inevitably dislocate and disturb the equanimity of NATO. Stresses and strains will occur, and that is another reason to set up a European rapid intervention force and have a European security and defence identity. However, we must create them without disturbing the strong links within NATO.

NATO is expanding. We must ensure that those countries that join NATO have the opportunity to equip themselves consistently with our equipment. We should not forget that, as NATO expands, the sphere of influence of the former Soviet Union will necessarily diminish. Russia and its allies had a huge military-industrial combine and the production of military equipment was an important part of the Russian economy. If Russia sees NATO expanding, it will effectively take markets away from the Russian military-industrial combine. We should be broadminded enough not to rule out the possibility that, one day, we will procure defence equipment from former Soviet Union countries in exactly the same way as we are contemplating the purchase of defence equipment from

Israel and South Africa. We should bear such issues in mind when we consider our defence procurement budgets.

On the scrutiny of defence procurement, there is an informed body of opinion among academics. The outstanding Royal United Services Institute is based just down the road from the House, but I want to pay tribute to the work of the Select Committee on Defence, of which I am a member. I admit that, when I began to serve on the Committee, I was a former Minister and thought that it and the other Select Committees were a boil on the backside of the world. I did not understand their relevance. It has taken me a long time to realise how valuable a Select Committee can be.

Select Committees can call witnesses before them and ask for expert papers. They have superb advisers and they can ask informed questions. They can also ask dumb questions, which are sometimes more helpful than the well-informed ones. The reports of the Select Committee on Defence are the most authoritative source of information on a range of defence issues. I pay tribute to the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George)—I almost called him my hon. Friend—and the Committee's other members for the valuable work that they do.

As with other procurement issues on which we have joined the United States or purchased equipment directly from the United States, it is remarkable how trouble free the nuclear deterrent issue has been. We need air superiority in high-intensity fighting capacity and I am a known unenthusiast for the Typhoon Eurofighter, which has a range of only 1,400 km compared with the range of more than 4,000 km of the Boeing 15E and the Sukhoi 35. The aerial dexterity of the Sukhoi and Mig aircraft is notable at air shows and makes the Typhoon look pretty pedestrian and lumbering. However, its electronics are extremely good, so it is a good aircraft.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Viggers: I am sorry, but I cannot. My speech is subject to a strict time limit, so I hope that my right hon. Friend will allow me to continue. I am watching the clock with care.

I am convinced that the decision to scrap the Mauser cannon in the Eurofighter is wrong. I speak as a former Royal Air Force pilot and as the commander of a guided missile squadron in the Territorial Army. I have spoken to many people in the Air Force about the Government's decision to scrap the Mauser cannon after the first 55 batch of Typhoons. It is interesting that every single pilot below the rank of group captain to whom I have spoken—I have spoken to many—said that it was madness to scrap the gun. Every single officer above the rank of group captain to whom I have spoken sucked their lips, thought for a moment, remembered their staff and defence college courses and loyalty to the body public, and said, "There are very powerful arguments for doing so."

We are told that the reasons why the gun was scrapped were nothing to do with money and that it was just not needed. In that case, why do the Rafale and Gripen fighters and all other Eurofighters procured by our allies—even, for goodness' sake, the F22 American stealth fighter—have cannons? Why have we decided that we do not need them? I have asked those who were involved in events in Sierra Leone whether it would have been helpful to have been able to fly a noisy aeroplane over the country and perhaps fire away a few rounds from a cannon. They said that that would have been absolutely invaluable. I am convinced that the decision is a mistake.

Moving to ship orders, I say in passing that when I saw the Secretary of State for Defence preening himself at the Dispatch Box, describing his wonderful plans for maritime purchase, I recalled that this Government have ordered no warships at all since May 1997. The problem is that, as in so many other areas, the Government are all mouth and no performance. We are at risk of encountering the same problem with heavy airlift capacity, as there might be difficulty nailing down the British part of the purchase of 25 A400M aircraft.

I think that I have time to touch on one other point. I see that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence is in his place. He wrote to me this week to say that 9,144 men in the Army are medically downgraded, and have been so for more than four weeks. That is almost 10 per cent. of the Army, and I find it incredible. The hon. Gentleman knows why that is so. It is because he is closing the only military hospital, which is in my constituency. The move to Birmingham will not work and, until he confirms that the Haslar hospital will continue as a defence medical services hospital also serving the civilian population, he will not have the strength of doctors, nurses and other staff that is needed in such services.

The way not to handle defence procurement is that displayed by Baroness Symons. She wrote about the Bowman programme—a programme in complete collapse—on 25 July:

> I am writing to inform you of a major step forward on the Bowman communications programme

and then she scrapped it. That is exactly the reverse of what I think we should be doing. We need honesty and openness in defence procurement.

5.2 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): I, too, will attempt to be brief. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers), who had some interesting insights into defence issues.

It is easy to realise from the feelings expressed earlier on the Floor of the House how incredibly important equipment issues have become to us, not only for the sake of our constituents but because we so desperately want to ensure that our very best resource—people in the Armed Forces—is given the very best equipment at the best price. That is why we become so animated when such issues are raised. We as Members of Parliament, and especially the Government, shoulder a huge responsibility to ensure that we get such issues right. It is very important that we secure modern, usable equipment that suits our armed forces.

My first word of warning to everybody in the defence industry and the armed forces who might be listening to the debate is that when they are promised great cuts in taxation at the election, they should think very carefully which Government will truly be interested in ensuring that our armed forces are properly equipped. Defence cuts are such an easy hit when times become hard, which I suspect they would for any future Government.

[Laura Moffatt]

It is important that we think about the procurements of the past and remember that there have been some enormous mistakes. I shall not cite a huge list; that would be a silly waste of time. We have heard hon. Members eloquently pointing out how important some procurement is to their constituents. I should like to relay to the House my experience and why I believe it is so important that we get procurement right.

Getting procurement right is particularly important to those in Kosovo and Macedonia. Being with the men and women on the ground who are doing the job on our behalf made me realise that their having to use a mobile phone during their working hours because we do not provide them with a proper radio station is wrong, and should not be part of our requirement. I hope that we can now see a way forward, especially given the very painful experience of re-tendering for the Bowman programme. Re-tendering was right—and I say that even though one company in my constituency was heavily involved in it. It was right to think about the future of that project.

I suspect that my next point will preclude my receiving an invitation to go to Washington with the Defence Committee. Our men and women serving on the ground with other forces throughout the world say readily and happily that the Americans have all the gear and no idea. That is no excuse for us not to ensure that our forces have proper equipment. It is important in these debates to remember not just the people on the front line but those in everyday jobs.

On a recent Select Committee visit to the Falkland Islands, we were transported in a very out-of-date Tristar aircraft that regularly breaks down and disappoints those in the armed forces who are waiting to get home after six months away from their families. That is an example of an incredibly expensive and daft way in which to procure travel. I sincerely hope that the Government will consider that issue. It may not be the sexy front-line stuff about which everyone has talked today, but it is very important to our armed forces that we move them around the country and the world properly, efficiently and cost-effectively.

I have some major concerns about delivery. To return to the Bowman issue, we must ensure that once we have started, we deliver on time. I understand that we have brought the project back into line, but I want to ensure that the in-service date of 2003-04 is secure and that our armed forces can rely on us to deliver exactly what they need when they need it.

Everybody wants to extol the virtues of parts of the defence industry on their own patch. I shall take a slightly different view and speak about the value of defence jobs in the United Kingdom. I have the great good fortune to live in Crawley, and Gatwick airport is within my constituency. Jobs in the area are largely directed towards the service industries. Without the defence industries in my town, there would be few jobs to entice university graduates back into the town to work on sophisticated communications systems. When we discuss procurement, we should remember how important such jobs are to our constituencies.

The European defence industry is undergoing enormous change. I believe that it is change for the better. We on the Defence Committee are watching matters closely and looking into the way in which we do business. A fine example of that was the quadripartite meetings of Select Committees, which together examined defence exports. That was a huge success and resulted in an excellent report.

The Government have done a superb job of ensuring that we know where exports are going. We could do more and produce more detailed reports. We have made a good start and should move towards greater transparency about the end users of the United Kingdom's defence exports. We are leading by example.

The use of new technologies in defence procurement delivers another agenda that is extremely important to the Government—equal opportunities. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), the Chairman of the Defence Committee, looking at me as if to say, "You managed to get that in again!" New, lighter technologies allow men and women to serve equally in all roles in our armed forces. Women do not want to be given an advantage, but lighter materials and lighter equipment provide a level playing field, and neither men nor women will have to carry heavy packs in future.

The systems are in place for us to move forward, and money is being made available for our armed forces. People should know that the Government are committed to the armed forces and will continue to support them, and the Defence Committee will continue to watch the Government with a keen eye.

5.11 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) on her emphasis on people in the defence industry. As a constituency Member of Parliament, I represent the interests of those who work at BAE Systems at Warton—some 6,000 people. They are part of the military aircraft division, which employs almost 13,000 people, who provide a vital backbone to Lancashire's economy.

There are 40,000 people in the north-west of England who rely on the aerospace industry, whose well-being depends largely on military orders, although of course civil orders are important as well. I mention those figures to put into context the number of people who are reliant on our success in that industry.

I have referred to large numbers of people, but I pay tribute to one person whom I used to follow in such debates: our former colleague Michael Colvin, the Member for Romsey. In a way, I feel his presence on the Bench in front of me, from which he used to make extremely knowledgeable contributions to defence debates. I am sorry that he is not present, but I hope that hon. Members will appreciate that, as far as I am concerned, he is here in spirit. The clarity of his contributions will not be forgotten.

The elements of strong defence are, I believe, a clear strategy, excellent people, the best kit and a budget to match. Those are the benchmarks by which one judges the success or otherwise of a procurement exercise. Clear strategy is, perhaps, a subject for debate next week, but if there is one element of the strategic demands on our forces which has become abundantly clear in recent times, it is the need for flexibility.

That has been acknowledged in references to the A400M. I am delighted that the Government have come to a conclusion on that. It was a difficult issue, but the

right decision has been made. Similarly, the Government made the right decision on the Meteor missile system. It is right that from the Opposition Benches we say thank you when good decisions have been made. We all recognise the need for quality air power and the importance of flexibility.

Future major procurement projects, whether transatlantic or within Europe, will succeed only through co-operation. That is a challenge, because it entails not just resolving some of the difficult political debates, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) alluded in his remarks from the Front Bench, but recognising one of the fundamental changes that is now occurring in the world of defence—the change in the industrial mix.

The United Kingdom is ideally placed for that. BAE Systems, with the takeover of Marconi and the Sanders division of Lockheed Martin, now has a major footprint in the United States and on this side of the Atlantic. The alliances and strategies, and companies working together, are a key ingredient of our future success in defence.

The debate is taking place because both sides of the House expressed concern that once again BAE Systems had had to reduce the number of people whom it employed. Thankfully, the reduction was implemented by natural wastage but, sadly, there are now fewer employees. Rationalisation was taking place in the organisation of the defence industry, and that was recognised. There was a quest for efficiency by that means to re-equip the company with the right skills and the right people for the future. The company recognised the demands that were to be made of it.

One of the issues that the work force find difficult to reconcile is that they know that a company has a £35 billion order book and ask, "Why is the company dispensing with our services?" Against that background, are the Government minded to acknowledge the importance of sustaining work and the importance to the north-west of England of the aerospace industry?

I understand that the Minister has many questions to answer, but perhaps in future the Secretary of State could try in a speech to put into context, for the benefit of the work force, how his Department sees the industrial backbone of the defence industry in the north-west. Does it understand why we become excited about big projects? We all know that they represent a great deal of work for our constituents. That is why we become excited. We should be excited because we are talking about the best kit for our armed forces. That guides our thinking.

If we are honest, we are looking after our constituents' interests and the numbers of jobs that big projects represent. Some words of comfort from the Government on that score would be extremely reassuring to the many hundreds of thousands of people who are somewhat confused because they are personally affected by the changed nature of the way in which large multinational companies operate, both in Europe and across the north Atlantic.

We shall see co-operation in future, perhaps because of the factors that underlie some of the projects that are now in the pipeline. The Eurofighter Typhoon has been mentioned. Co-operation with our partners is important, and so is the second strand in UK defence policy. We need strong UK-based companies for a key strategic reason.

In the Gulf conflict, no Tornado or Jaguar would have flown properly equipped if short-term modifications could not have been made to those aircraft. Whether we talk of ships, aircraft or land-based equipment, we must sustain our industrial base. If we do not, and if the chips are down and there is a real conflict, we shall not be able to modify our equipment to cope with strategic demands. That will not be possible if we do not have skilled design teams and skilled manufacturers, down to the humble fitter. Again, I seek some comfort from the Government Front Bench. I hope that the view that I have outlined is in the Government's mind when they make strategic decisions.

Much has been made of so-called smart procurement. I think that it is now called acquisitive procurement. I read an interesting article in a magazine published by the Royal United Services Institute, which was written by Michael Bell. He poses some interesting questions, which are a challenge to us for the future. His first and key point is to draw our attention to the fact that in procurement terms there are few big projects, and there is an incredible amount of competition for them. There is tremendous commercial risk attached to bidding to get them—and to the risk that the company will not get them.

In that scenario, Michael Bell questioned whether a winner-takes-all approach is the best way to run procurement projects. Even within the context of smart procurement, competition still underpins the way in which decisions are made.

Mr. Bell writes:

> companies are prepared to take more risk than is prudent because the alternative of losing is so dire.

In the same article, Sir Robert Walmsley, chief executive of the Defence Procurement Agency, is quoted. His agency was invited to comment on the delays in the maritime patrol aircraft programme, and he says:

> It has taught me a lesson about competitions that are regarded as "must wins", i.e. the company decides they just have to win and perhaps you get into a position where they almost want it too much because the consequences of the contract getting into trouble several years downstream, ghastly as they are, are far less ghastly than not getting the contract and wondering what you are going to do tomorrow.

Now is not the time for a detailed discussion of Nimrod, but we should heed those wise words and think again about our procurement philosophy.

Michael Bell raises another valid point when he says of smart procurement:

> It wholly failed to address the points about the influence of competition policy on procurement failures presented by industry to the strategic defence review.

Industry will embrace smart procurement because working together makes sense, but I have drawn attention to some small cameos that should persuade us to reflect carefully on the results of the policy.

One of the key ingredients in the mixture is a strong budget. The £1.5 billion cuts in the budget for the RAF are not settled, so perhaps the Minister will comment on that issue when he winds up the debate. Can he unequivocally guarantee that the Government currently have no intention either of reducing the number of Eurofighter Typhoons that they procure, or of amending the timetable for that procurement?

The joint strike fighter programme is vital to the development of our aerospace industry, but there is a bill to be met. I understand that if we are to participate in the

[Mr. Michael Jack]

process over the next four years, the Government have to commit $1.6 billion; if they do not, we shall be unable to sit at the table with other partners and, more important, we will not have the leverage needed to have access to the full range of technologies involved in the programme. I hope that the Minister can offer an assurance that the Government stand four-square behind British participation in the project and that the money to keep us at the top table will be made available.

I should be grateful for clarification of the position on the future offensive air system, which has not yet been mentioned in the debate. I understand that it has the potential to serve as seedcorn for new technologies and as the source of the replacement for the Tornado, whether that is a manned or unmanned aircraft. The project has become enmeshed in some of the thinking about the joint strike fighter and about modifying and upgrading the Eurofighter Typhoon, perhaps for a marine application. How do the Government perceive the future offensive air system in the context of its relationship to the joint strike fighter and modifications to existing equipment?

Will the Minister comment on the Government's efforts to settle with the Government of India the question of their procurement of the successful Hawk aircraft? Finally, will he explain the problem with the adoption of the thermal imaging and laser designation system on the Tornado GR4? In a letter dated 27 April, the Minister for the Armed Forces tried to tell me that the nature of some of the problems was technological, but, in a letter from the MOD dated 8 October, I was told that the problems emerged during trials run by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency which uncovered

a number of unforeseen difficulties with the TIALD system.

Considering how long the Tornado mid-life update was in procurement, I find it distressing that I should have received two diametrically opposed opinions from the MOD on a problem that should have been solved before a single GR4 was accepted back into service. However, I am grateful to the Minister for his tribute to BAE Systems for the work that it has done in sorting that out.

Finally, on the theme of personnel, attracting people into an engineering environment is vital to the procurement industry, but attracting people into the RAF is equally important. As president of 2468 squadron of the Air Cadet Force in my constituency I see the poor-quality equipment that those young cadets who are keen on defence have to use on the two nights a week and at the weekends when they come along to learn their skills. Would it not be right to invest a little more in more up-to-date equipment and premises for those young people? They are the seedcorn of our aerospace industry and the RAF and they deserve a better deal.

5.25 pm

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's announcement to the House this afternoon. Placing additional orders for strategic kit will support effective operability and defence capability in the theatre of operation. I am more than delighted to hear that two of the four ALSLs, the amphibious landing ships, will be built on the Tyne. It gives me real pleasure.

I worked on the Tyne when the Conservative Government decided not to award contracts to Swan Hunter. My union, the General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union, which represented more than 3,500 people, was destroyed by that. It was seen as a deliberately vindictive attempt to close down a Labour community. That Labour community is most certainly still there and it will be joyful tonight. My constituency is the Tees and the sister company to Swan Hunter is Herema on the Tees. I hope that, with clustering and an emphasis on community and on widening capacity, my company on the Tees will also benefit from the order. I know for certain that Corus, which makes the best steel in the world, will ensure that it tenders to supply the steel for those ships.

The House is seeing the reality of the strategic defence review, with billions of pounds being spent on modernising the armed forces to ensure that they are equipped for the post-cold war period, with sufficient flexibility and mobility for rapid deployment. That is something of which to be proud, and I am more than proud to say that it is my Government who are doing it.

I have watched our armed forces with care, and people know that my interest is a keen one. I have watched them with care in the Balkans, I have had the pleasure of meeting our armed forces in Bosnia and I recently watched their actions in Kosovo. More and more, I have come to the conclusion that, because they were so clearly denied the equipment that they needed by the previous Government, we now rely heavily on the capabilities of the people who are the backbone of the armed forces.

Having visited our armed forces far too many times to be under any illusion about what happened under the Conservative Government, I also came to the conclusion that that Government left our armed forces seriously frustrated and demoralised, ill-equipped for combat and unfocused with regard to their role in the world, and they left an MOD less, rather than more, capable of spending public money effectively. Therefore, I am more than pleased to be standing here today, taking part in a procurement debate in which my Government are saying how and in what way they will facilitate an effective armed force for tomorrow.

The reality of my statements is borne out in the report of the Select Committee on Defence on the lessons of Kosovo. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) and his Committee are to be congratulated on their thorough report.

The Select Committee report concludes that, in the theatre of operations, the British Army was left with incompatible information systems across NATO. That is a telling statement. The Army was using insecure and obsolete United Kingdom tactical communications. Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe told the Committee that

so far as interception of communications was concerned, the Yugoslavs had us cold.

What an indictment of the Conservative party! The report states that there was a lack of all-weather precision-bombing capability, and that there was a continuing deficit in United Kingdom and European strategic lift capabilities.

I contend that the various serious defects in the United Kingdom's capability are down to the previous Government's apparent indifference to the requirements

of the armed forces. I believe that the Conservative Government used the peace premium as a convenient excuse to neglect and cut the armed forces. To believe that it is possible to put right the ills of years of neglect in the short time that we have been in government is to believe in miracles. From the Opposition's actions and their speeches today, they clearly believe in miracles. Indeed, they believe blindly in miracles.

The serious underfunding of the British armed forces for many years is being remedied at last. Perhaps the process is too slow even for me, and I am confident, challenging and robust about the matter. However, the process is happening. Billions of pounds are being spent appropriately and deservedly on an excellent British Army.

The Government are laying the foundations for a long-term vision of excellence in the field of operation, in the constructs of partnership for peace with NATO, and in the development of an EU defence initiative. My constituents in Stockton, South and on the Tees will benefit from that vision. It does not simply mean work, but a sense of pride and satisfaction in the fact that our armed forces have a tomorrow that they certainly deserve.

5.32 pm

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): The hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) made an interesting and impassioned contribution as she expressed her joy and delight at the good fortune of her constituency. Many hon. Members who are here today have constituency interests. I wish I could speak with the same joy and passion because the defence industry is vital to the economy of Hampshire. *[Interruption.]* The Under-Secretary seems to be making an encouraging remark, which is always good to hear. However, perhaps he will not be so enthusiastic when he hears what I have to say.

Hampshire has the most defence-dependent economy of all the shire counties in the country. I have reminded hon. Members on several occasions that more than 300 firms are employed by the defence industry to a significant extent in Hampshire, especially around Eastleigh and Southampton. I am sure that the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) wishes to make similar points.

I want to concentrate on only two matters this afternoon to give other hon. Members an opportunity to contribute. I shall speak about two major defence procurement projects, both of which other hon. Members have mentioned in passing or in greater detail. They are the Bowman project, which is now deceased, and the type 45 destroyer programme, which has yet to leave the cradle.

The Secretary of State said that we should learn from our mistakes. There is a lot to be learned from what happened to Bowman. I have a specific interest in the Bowman project because the company that was responsible for the procurement was based in my constituency. It no longer exists. Bowman was supposed to create for our armed forces an integrated communications system, which would have been a world beater. It would have equipped anything from a Land Rover to an aircraft carrier with the most highly sophisticated, most advanced communications system in the world. It would have given massive advantages to our armed forces and it had huge export potential. It could have earned many billions of pounds for the UK economy. The project was years late in being commissioned by the MOD—for which I do not blame the present Government—leaving our armed forces struggling with out-of-date and archaic equipment known as the Clansman system, which was little more advanced, some say, than the old VALs. In addition, the contractors appointed to undertake the project had suffered delay after delay while the MOD kept changing its mind and specifications.

Hon. Members will know that the National Audit Office was highly critical of the institutional delays built into the MOD project management at the time which caused the delays to the Bowman project. I visited the main contractor, Archer Communications, in my constituency many times to see the problems and difficulties it faced in the three years until the project was cancelled. I will never forget seeing a wall chart in the managing director's office which set out how management and staff had to deal with the MOD in the project. The wall chart gave the project hierarchy of the various departments, sections and specialists within the MOD involved in the project. More than 100 people were involved in different phases of the management process of the project. They were all part of the decision chain; or, should I say, the indecision chain.

It was impossible for the contractor to get timely answers to queries and decisions on developments. There seemed to be a complete ignorance of the basic concept that, for a contractor, time is money. In spite of the efforts of the contractor, the outcome was that the project was further delayed, the cost estimates escalated and—perhaps to cover their embarrassment—the Government cancelled the project; or, should we say, redefined it. The net result was that £200 million of taxpayers' money was lost and will not be recovered in the redevelopment of the project. I agree with the NAO that that money was wasted. Some 650 highly skilled and advanced engineering jobs were lost to my constituency and, as a result, a centre of excellence was destroyed.

In correspondence with me, the Government—through the Minister for Defence Procurement—have said that if smart procurement had been in place, these pitfalls would have been avoided and the problem would not have arisen. Smart procurement is now in place, so presumably it will not arise again on other projects. That is why I wish to refer to the type 45 destroyer procurement programme.

The Government announced in July that, under their procurement strategy, BAE Systems would be the prime contractor. Vosper Thornycroft and BAE Marine would be design and construction contractors for the first three vessels. The Secretary of State said at the time that the Government's approach in the programme would ensure that experience in the type 45 construction was spread between BAE Systems, BAE Marine and Vosper Thornycroft, assisting future competition for follow-on ships.

The key point is that Vosper Thornycroft and BAE Marine were to participate equally. It was a cornerstone of the Government's strategy to maintain competition in warship building in the UK. However, to achieve that, there must be fair and equal allocation of work on the type 45, particularly in the early part of the programme—the first three ships.

[Mr. David Chidgey]

It is important to remember that the prime contractor gave the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry an undertaking as a condition of its merger, or takeover, with Marconi. The undertaking was not to discriminate in favour of its own subsidiaries when tendering as prime contractor. The Government's procurement strategy should be accepted as overriding individual companies' commercial aspirations.

There are real concerns at VT that BAE Systems is seeking to move away from equal work sharing on the type 45. Contract negotiations are being prolonged and agreements on prices are being revisited and queried time and again, all adding to delays that may crucially affect VT's continued participation in the project.

VT has acknowledged that it has a short-term gap in production, and as a result, 650 shipyard workers have been given predictive redundancy notices, which will start to take effect in January. The type 45 project is supposed to be ordered by the end of this year. Those 650 skilled craftsmen are more than half the work force. If the redundancies go ahead, the VT shipbuilding division could become unviable.

If the contract is delayed, VT will be unable to keep that essential work force intact. It will be unable to justify investment that it needs to make to meet the targets in the type 45 production programme, and it could well decide to withdraw from warship construction altogether. If, because of the stumbling blocks, delays and indecision, and because its work force has been stripped, it withdraws to concentrate on its other wide and successful ventures in engineering, production, manufacturing and training, the Government's strategy for retaining competition in the warship building industry will be in shreds.

Government Members may wish to reflect on the wider, long-term effects. There are currently about 4,500 skilled craftsmen in the warship building industry. At the peak of the Government's programme for warship building, we will need 9,000. If VT were to withdraw from shipbuilding, we would lose more than a quarter of our existing skills base and would be going backwards rather than forwards. History shows that when such skilled people leave shipbuilding, they do not come back, as there is great demand for their skills in other industries. We could be taking a highly retrograde step, when we need to build up the skills base in the shipbuilding industry for the over-30 ships programme.

The Government must maintain competition in the UK warship building industry. They must ensure that the type 45 destroyer procurement strategy is adhered to by all the parties. They must ensure that companies such as VT receive fair and equal allocation of work, especially for the first three type 45 destroyers. I would hope that, by doing that, the Government can ensure that the 650 jobs at VT—many of them filled by people from Eastleigh and most of them requiring skilled craftsmen—are not lost to the industry. That is how the Government can demonstrate to me and my constituents that they are committed to smart procurement.

5.43 pm

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow): As a member of the Select Committee on Defence, it was my intention all along to speak in this debate, as the Committee has devoted a great deal of effort to procurement issues, and specifically to the lessons learned from recent engagements by our armed forces throughout the world, but the announcements made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State give me an ideal opportunity to comment on his procurement decisions and how they affect the area that I represent in the north-east.

I extend the warmest possible welcome to the decision to award the contract to build the alternative landing ships to Swan Hunter on the Tyne. It is good news for the armed forces because, as my right hon. Friend said, the current provision is over 30 years old and in desperate need of replacement, but it is especially good for the workers on Tyneside and those in my constituency who will benefit directly from the work in that yard.

The order will create about 2,000 jobs on Tyneside. Workers who are at present scattered all over the world, not just the United Kingdom, will get the opportunity to come back and work in their home town. Moreover, more than 500 extra jobs will be created in the external economy, thanks to the economic activity in the area. That is great news.

Probably more important than any other factor, however, is the creation at the Swan Hunter yard of 100 apprenticeships. Skilled workers on the Tyne average 50 years of age, and the figure is rising, so those apprenticeships are crucial. The fact that the average age today is 50 does not mean that it will be 51 next year: the cyclical basis of the industry means that the average will be 53 in a year's time.

The decision announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State today is crucial. It will stabilise the shipbuilding and repair industry on the Tyne, and it will pave the way for additional Ministry of Defence contracts—possibly for the manufacture of aircraft carriers—in the future. The order is therefore excellent news for Tyneside.

However, it would be wrong of me not to voice my concern at my right hon. Friend's decision about the ro-ro contracts. I have had meetings with my right hon. Friend about them, and I have also mentioned the issue twice in debates in this House. I have also asked a parliamentary question on the matter. No explanation that I have been given of why the private finance option was taken has convinced me that the decision would be helpful to British industry.

I welcome the fact that part of the order is going to Belfast. The creation of 500 extra jobs there is good news for the area's economic viability and for the peace process. Many of my colleagues who work in the north-east shipyards also work in Belfast, where they have made friends for life with their co-workers in the industry. Yet the decision about the four remaining ro-ros should be questioned. The industry in the UK does not share a level playing field with that on the continent. People who work abroad will confirm that, as will business leaders and trade union leaders.

To place a multi-million pound order, and the years of work involved in it, with a European contractor, at the expense of workers on the Tyne, the Mersey, the Clyde and the south coast is indefensible. I would love to know what other European country would do that—I do not believe that any would.

The order for the four ro-ro vessels is going to Germany, but is my right hon. Friend aware that the bulk of the work will probably be done in Poland, where there

is a cheap labour regime? To understand how firms in Poland undercut British industry, one has only to look at the contract that is being proposed.

There should be an investigation across the political spectrum into initiatives that have been funded by means of the PFI. Is it in the taxpayer's interest to export the jobs involved in the order abroad? I know that my right hon. Friend was under intense pressure from civil servants, but recent developments have taught us that they are not always correct.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), who is Chairman of the Defence Committee, said earlier that the Committee was told in evidence from the Ministry of Defence that the ro-ro ships would not be classed as warships. Those ships will operate in war zones, and it does not take much imagination to understand that vessels working in areas of conflict should be designated as warships. I believe that the advice given to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was wrong.

My right hon. Friend has confirmed that the ro-ro vessels will sail under a foreign flag—except in times of conflict. I am led to believe that the consortiums building the other vessels gave a guarantee that the crews on those ships would be British and would sail under the British flag, and that they would belong to the RMT union. Those are the options for Glasgow, Tyneside and Merseyside.

It is acceptable in peacetime that the vessels should be able to work around the world and under foreign flags, with their foreign crews earning their wages for being involved in fruitful employment. However, in times of war, when it gets dangerous, British lads will have to crew the ships. If it is right for them to work when it is dangerous, it should be right for them in times of peace to make money for themselves and their families.

This policy flies in the face of our maritime policy. Under the leadership of the Deputy Prime Minister, a tonnage tax was introduced that was linked to training and employment, and the employment of British crews under a United Kingdom flag. Flying under a foreign flag goes against that policy.

I appeal to the Minister to scrap the whole thing. The Government should go back to the drawing board and come up with a design that can be classed as a warship. No one is saying that the order should not be awarded to Belfast, the south coast or Tyneside—as long as it is awarded to a British yard so that we can get the benefit.

There are examples: the replacement for the Atlantic Conveyor, which was sunk in the Falklands, was built at Swan Hunter and paid for by public money. It was given to P&O, but was always at the call of the British military for use in times of conflict.

Notwithstanding that, I do not want one daft decision on ro-ros to overshadow today's great announcement for Tyneside as far as jobs are concerned. There is no doubt that the order for Swan Hunter is good for Tyneside. It stabilises the industry, gives the north-east economy a shot in the arm and sends the message that Tyneside has a future in shipbuilding and ship repair. However, I ask the Secretary of State to think again about ro-ros.

5.51 pm

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): I wish to speak about a specific area of current defence procurement—the type 45 destroyer programme. I do so as a Member of Parliament representing a Southampton seat, because the Vosper Thornycroft yard is in Southampton.

First, I wish to say a few words about how I see the current state of defence procurement. It will not exactly hit the headlines, but there is a stark contrast between the Government's overall approach and the previous Government's woeful record. The previous Government appeared to have a blind spot on defence procurement. It was always curious to me that at the same time as they were announcing draconian penalties for local authorities which had marginally stepped out of line on compulsory competitive tendering, they were tolerating huge overruns on contracts, inadequate competition safeguards, sole tender contracts and all sorts of practices in defence procurement. Collectively, that meant that far more was spent on equipment than was necessary and far longer was spent completing contracts than should have been tolerated. The result was that there was far less investment and equipment than could have been the case.

The recent National Audit Office report on the cost overrun on 25 major projects suggested that about £3.2 billion had been spent on those overruns which could have secured more than half of the projected type 45 destroyer programme. That is the extent of the overruns that the previous Government appeared happy to tolerate.

The overall design of the type 45 programme is the result of smart procurement—the idea that we get better value and that contracts are completed more quickly by paying closer attention to procurement, ensuring that competition is sound and procurement is carried out in a best value regime. However, a problem arises when we apply smart procurement to the type 45 programme, because only two companies could build the vessels for the programme. The question is how to ensure good value and effective competition when there are only two tenderers. In this sense we get into game theory—the so-called prisoner's dilemma and chicken. It becomes difficult to envisage real competition when there are only two tenderers; both are likely to know the moves of the other but will not necessarily have the same starting point in their tendering practices.

With a programme of 12 ships to be tendered for over a period of time, there has to be competition over the life of the bidding. It is no good simply having a competition at the beginning of the bidding, after which the rest of the competition goes out of the window because one of the competitors may not subsequently be able to compete.

Again I quote Sir Robert Walmsley, who has been mentioned this afternoon and who said, very appositely, to the Defence Committee last year:

> Let me come back to the very real point of Vospers and competition. The issue of making sure that Vospers are a credible competitor has very much conditioned our approach to this programme because we know that if we do not compete the follow-on production order there will be very little incentive to shipyards to improve their performance. We know what a success it has been on Type 23s, and there is a sense in which you need one really good competition and it moves everything forward to a new datum from which subsequent incremental improvements can be achieved.

He was clear about the need to ensure proper competition throughout the building of the 12 vessels and about the fact that Vosper is, and will be, an important part of that competition.

[Dr. Alan Whitehead]

The design that the Government have gone for for this complicated contract and to solve the problem of two tenderers only, is to eschew a straight bid for ship one, which might save some money in the short term but would be disastrous in the longer term, and go instead for a prime contractor for the first three vessels. Vessels one and three are to be built at Yarrow, while vessel two is to be built at Vosper's, but modular work on vessels one and three will be carried out by Vosper and the design and engineering will be shared between the two yards, so that, by the completion of ship three, both yards will have shared the work about 50:50. Most importantly, both yards will have shared the learning curve so that they can compete on an equal playing field for the vessels thereafter.

By the time that the yards have to bid for vessels four to 12, as Sir Robert said, all involved will have a realistic chance of winning. That is the idea of smart procurement as it is applied to that contract. In principle, that seems a sound system and a sound method of ensuring that the 12-vessel contract can be procured at the best value for the British taxpayer.

What if the prime contractor is also the owner of one of the two yards scheduled to build the first three vessels, however? That is the case with the type 45 contract. This is a hypothetical temptation, but I can imagine it being very real. Rationally, as a business, the prime contractor's goal would be to gain a monopoly over the building of the 12 vessels if possible. Indeed, the rational action to take in that case would be to ensure that the competition was not in a position to tender after three vessels, or better still, was not in a position to complete the work on the first three.

Appearances certainly suggest confirmation of that strategy. I am not saying that that is the case, just that it appears that way to me on the south coast and to some people who are involved with Vosper's shipyard. Vosper and Yarrow were asked to put in a price to the prime contractor for the work. They know each other's prices and are collaborating on the work. The prime contractor said, however, that the prices were too high, even though the productivity gain in the prices submitted was, I understand, unprecedented.

That is the equivalent of a poker game between two players when one has a limitless line of credit with the casino owner and the other has only the chips that he brought to the table. The object in those circumstances might therefore not be to win with the best cards but simply to drive the opponent away from the table because one has superior betting power.

That is a real problem for the strategy as far as the Government are concerned. It is certainly a real issue for the 600 workers at Vosper's yard who have had precautionary redundancy notices served on them because the signatures on the dotted line are not there between Vosper and the prime contractors despite the Government's good intentions.

The danger is that if the process drags on too long—whether accidentally or deliberately—Vosper will have to declare those men redundant. As the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) said, after that it would be difficult to get back to the starting line to compete for a contract. Then, we would end up with a monopoly contractor, which is the opposite of what the Government intend.

It may be said that this is not an issue for Government because it is an internal matter between the prime contractor and its subcontractors. Indeed, the Secretary of State suggested that this afternoon. However, given the specialised and very restricted circumstances that I have mentioned, it is an issue for the Government. The outcome of an internal decision to procrastinate on the contract can overthrow the entire admirable and supportable smart procurement structure that the Government have set out for type 45s.

It is important that the Government ensure that the prime contractor lets the contracts on time, and with Sir Richard's words firmly in its ears. I do not know the small print and detail of the prime contract with BAE, nor whether the Government have already taken action, but I suggest that they should do so and ensure that the small print is adhered to. I would welcome hearing the Minister's thoughts on that in his reply. There is a real possibility that smart procurement, with all its manifest advantages will not work in the specialised circumstances of the type 45 programme. That will be desperately sad for the 600 men who would lose their jobs at Vospers but. more important, it could be very costly for the United Kingdom defence procurement programme and might force a return to the inefficiencies and the regime that we have thankfully got away from with our smart procurement programme.

6.1 pm

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for his informative words, but I should like to probe two aspects of military procurement. They have nothing to do with my constituency. In fact, procurement has little to do with my constituency. First, in what overall international political context are military procurement decisions made? Secondly, once delivery of military hardware and software has been obtained, what can be done if the goods are faulty?

I shall pose some questions for my hon. Friend the Minister to consider. The documents before us and what has been said earlier give little away about the overall international political context. We are considering projects and comments on projects, but I cannot easily discern an overall international political strategy in which those projects can be judged. That may well be my fault and, if so, I am sure that I will be told.

For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) said that the four ships will be built in Germany, probably with cheap Polish labour. If there is no international political context, we cannot judge whether the decisions are good or bad, or made on political or financial grounds. When the European Union is enlarged, we shall have to help out Poland, and that may be one of the means to do so.

My main interest is that military procurement is a highly political issue, with aspects involving finance, resources, efficiency, interested parties, international obligations and institutions, nation states and employment issues. I am particularly interested in the international political context of procurement, and I shall explain why.

I am not a member of the Select Committee on Defence. I am therefore not steeped in its peculiar language or paucity of political perspective. The emphasis

is on contracts, on weaponry and on which constituency gets what. I am very surprised by what has been said, given the lack of that context.

I am a member of the Western European Union Assembly. I attended my first meeting of the political committee of the WEU about two and half years ago. Before that meeting, I decided that I would read the papers carefully and that I would keep my mouth firmly shut during my first committee proceeding. The paper's rapporteur was Mr. Martinez, a parliamentarian from Spain, and its title was "WEU Relations with Russia". It was 16 pages long and dated 5 March 1998. I read the paper with care. Overtly, its objective was about the Russian Federation's becoming an associate member of the Western European Union but, covertly, its objective was more sinister. Reading between the lines, it argued for Russia to become an associate member and, for good measure, it also threw in the Ukraine in its conclusion. The inclusion of Russia in the WEU would create a breach between Europe and the United States and weaken the Atlantic alliance. The paper also proposed moving substantial European military procurement to Russia.

One passage from that paper stated:

> And in an interview with *Corriera della Sera* on 8 February 1998 the Russian President did go as far as to reveal his country's intention of becoming a full member of all the institutions working for European integration in an effort to counter United States domination and monopoly.

The Russians certainly play a long game.

I found the paper arrogant, brash in its twisting of history and full of half-truths. During the meeting, about eight WEU delegates were particularly sycophantic and I broke the golden rule of never speaking in a first meeting. I pointed out my misgivings but Mr. Martinez became displeased with my comments. The final vote was 39 to one, and I felt what the Tories must have felt daily since May 1997.

After the meeting, nine delegates told me that they had misgivings too, but felt that they could not vote against Mr. Martinez. I did not know much about him at the time, but I later found out that he was a former president of the Council of Europe, and had ushered in Russia's membership. Russia has now been more or less slung out of the Council of Europe; at least, its vote has been taken away. Mr. Martinez has done much internationally—in Europe and transatlantically—and he is now a Member of the European Parliament, where he tells the same stories.

In subsequent meetings during the past few years, I have met several members of the Russian delegation and Members of the Duma. In the main, I found them demanding—never giving—and often arrogant. It reminded me, incidentally, of discussions with Americans.

The hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) rightly mentioned the percentages of 100, 60 and 15. I sometimes wonder whether we bear that point in mind sufficiently in relation to international military procurement. We should bear the EU in mind in such contexts, and perhaps go beyond OCCAR, and we should have discussions with our colleagues in the EU.

My second point, which is slightly shorter, involves the delivery by firms of military hardware that is found to be faulty when used. Two points from our experience in Kosovo come to mind. First, were military procurement and negotiation and research facilities so weak and ill informed that one could sell them, as the song goes, any old iron? Secondly, do we use price efficiency ratios and other indicators to judge performance?

The public increasingly feel that the taxpayer is being robbed by dodgy entrepreneurs in the military sector. If a house builder sells one a new house and the roof collapses, one has means of redress, but if anti-armour missiles and all-weather, precision-guided bombs do not work, who pays? That matter should be more openly discussed.

In summary, will my hon. Friend explain whether we have an overall political international procurement perspective in the United Kingdom? If so, what are the details, especially with regard to proposed EU developments? My hon. Friend will no doubt answer me in writing. Secondly, who decides about which matters? Are the United Kingdom, the United States, the EU or multinationals involved, or are all of them involved, and in what context? Finally, who pays when we receive dodgy goods, when there are price overruns or time overruns, and when costly mistakes are committed by firms after procurement, even once inefficiencies in MOD processes are taken into account? I look forward to my hon. Friend's reply.

6.9 pm

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): First, I pay tribute to the people who work in our shipyards, dockyards and defence industry who try daily to deliver of their best. Secondly, I pay tribute to Ministers who have difficult procurement decisions to make, as was demonstrated earlier today. Thirdly, I pay tribute to our armed forces who are so highly thought of throughout the world and whose lives depend on the equipment that we procure for them. Unfortunately, over the years, we have not provided the best equipment for them to meet their needs. That has been highlighted in reports from the Ministry of Defence, the National Audit Office and the Defence Committee.

My next point concerns a constituency matter. Unfortunately, Parliamentary Private Secretary commitments kept me from the Chamber during the private notice question on hunter-killer submarines earlier this week. The Secretary of State mentioned it today and I should like to ask the Minister three questions. First, does he agree that Rosyth dockyard has excellent facilities and a highly skilled and professional work force ideally suited to undertake submarine repair and refit work? Secondly, will he make a commitment that Babcock Rosyth will get its fair share of any additional repair work that is being handed out on the Swiftsure and Trafalgar class submarines? Thirdly, does he agree that this unfortunate incident demonstrates the need to have at least two dockyard facilities in the United Kingdom?

On a national issue, I pay tribute to the Government's efforts to smarten up the procurement procedure—this smart acquisition, as it is now called, just to confuse all of us who are daily confused by defence jargon. Both the NAO and Defence Committee reports recognise that, in the past three years, some progress has been made, albeit slowly. Criticisms of the procurement process need to be levelled more at the previous Government than at the present Government, who have made every effort to start to change the system.

I listened with great interest to the comments on the type 45 frigate because recently I visited the Defence Procurement Agency at Abbey Woods. I was given an

[Ms Rachel Squire]

excellent presentation on the type 45 and the BVRAAM. I was impressed by the whole concept of the integrated project teams and the complex and challenging matters with which they have to deal.

That brings me to two or three brief points on the international front. As has been said, the type 45 frigate was originally supposed to be a collaborative effort with the French and Italian Governments, when it was known as the common new generation frigate or project Horizon. Various difficulties arose, particularly disagreements over the capabilities required. Does that mean, as the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) seems to suggest, that we should ditch ideas of international collaboration and co-operation on procurement issues? I think not.

We need international collaboration to provide us with all the defence equipment that we need. It may be hard to face up to this, but our country, like many others, can no longer afford to deliver every single item of defence equipment entirely through British industry. We need co-operation and collaboration to do that. It does not make sense to go it alone, strategically, operationally or, frankly, industrially.

We need international collaboration to build on our alliances, particularly NATO, and to promote interoperability between and with our allies. As we all know, the reality is that defence procurement decisions are influenced not only by what is the best equipment, but by foreign policy and trade and industry considerations.

We also need international collaboration and co-operation because of globalisation. During the past 10 years, the world defence industry has been rationalised into four prime defence contractors, of which BAE Systems is one. That raises certain issues as to competitiveness in the UK. It also links us to the whole rationalisation of the European defence industry and to the development of a European market that can compete with the US without taking us into either Fortress Europe or Fortress America. We must take those alliances into consideration in our procurement decisions, while protecting our national interests.

Finally, international collaboration and co-operation are important for technological development, which moves so rapidly. That highlights how important it is for DERA and the Defence Diversification Agency to keep us up to pace with that technology. We must ensure that the skills of our shipyards, dockyards and defence industry are efficiently translated into promoting civilian manufacturing, engineering and technological excellence while maintaining our defence capabilities.

We may be a small country, but we have always thought big. We should continue to do so.

6.16 pm

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): This is the first time that I have wanted to speak in a defence debate. Previously, I felt that I did not have enough experience or knowledge to contribute to such debates. However, during the past few months, I have taken part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, serving with the Royal Marines. That experience and my conversations and discussions with service personnel have shown me that there are a number of problems with some of their equipment, many of which do not seem to have been considered in decisions on future procurement.

The Royal Marines and members of all our armed services are dedicated, professional and highly motivated. No one wants conflict to take place. No one wants to send forces into conflict, but we all want to ensure that, should military conflict be necessary, our air, sea and land forces have the equipment that they need to do the job. I suspect that, in some recent conflicts, it is the dedication and the skills of our personnel rather than their equipment—unfortunately, sometimes, in spite of their equipment—that have achieved our success.

My hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred to the SA80 rifle. Whenever I asked Royal Marines which was their worst piece of equipment, they replied, without hesitation, that it was the SA80. I witnessed trials on their firing ranges and on exercises and on several occasions the weapon did not work. It works neither in desert conditions nor when there is excessive moisture in the air. The jamming is such that only about 30 per cent. of the rifles work at any given time. The design of the weapon is poor; it makes both right and left-hand use impossible. The reliability of the SA80 is extremely questionable and that puts our troops in danger in certain conflicts.

I understand that a programme of alterations has already been agreed by the Ministry of Defence. If possible, will my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary tell us this evening when that programme will be completed to ensure that some upgrading and improvements take place to provide a much better weapon, although certainly not the kind of weapon that our armed forces deserve and would like to have? Will that weapon get to the front line so that our rapidly deployed forces can use it?

I am also concerned about landing craft utilities. Last week, I visited Poole with the Royal Marines and had an opportunity to see the vessels and landing craft that they are using at the moment. The mark 10 landing craft utility is due to come into service in future and is currently in trials. It was originally commissioned in the mid-1980s but, some years down the line, it still has not come into being and several problems make it inappropriate for the kind of work that our Royal Marines would like to undertake with it.

During the testing of much equipment, including weapons, landing craft and radios—several hon. Members have mentioned the Bowman programme—there have been many instances when the views of military personnel were not taken into account. Many issues raised by personnel are simple and straightforward and concern things that would make life a lot easier for them if only those who procured the equipment listened to the views of those who risked their lives for this country. The personnel work with the equipment day to day, and have a much greater knowledge of it than anyone in the Chamber or the Whitehall offices of the Ministry of Defence. I am concerned that there appears to be a lack of interest in listening to those who use the equipment on a daily basis.

I am conscious of time and the need for Front-Bench spokespersons to answer all the points that have been made in a debate, in which many interesting issues were raised. However, may I make a strong case for greater opportunity for service personnel to be involved in procurement issues? They feel that they are constantly left out and that their views are not heard. Much of the news

that they get about when equipment is likely to come on stream is filtered through the system and is corrupted one way or another, a little bit like Chinese whispers. They do not get the information that would allow them to feel confident that the procurement of equipment takes into account their concerns and needs. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend in his winding-up speech gives comfort to those who serve on the front line about when the equipment is likely to be completed—and when, in particular, the SA80 will be upgraded—so that they can be assured of the equipment that they deserve and that is necessary for them to carry out their duties.

6.23 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): In many ways, our debate has been extremely revealing and some important subjects have been raised. As I do not have an enormous amount of time, I hope that I may be forgiven for not following my usual practice of commenting on every Back-Bench contribution.

Let me single out five contributions that were particularly original and well informed, one of which was the contribution of the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward). We all welcome her to these defence debates and, given her obvious knowledge of, and sympathy for, the subject, I hope that we shall hear a great deal from her in future—perhaps as early as next week, if she is lucky enough to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I should like to compliment my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), who also knows a lot about defence and made a strong case on the need for us to maintain a military and industrial base in this country. Otherwise, as he rightly pointed out, in a crisis we would simply not have the skills available to convert equipment rapidly and support our troops, sailors and airmen in the field.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers), who has a long record of taking part in defence debates, made some very good points. He made one point that needs to be made over and over again. Despite all the spin and announcements of announcements that are made or contracts that are to be signed, the Government have not signed a single contract or committed money to build a single warship since they took over the reins of power in 1997. No one should be allowed to get away with that, irrespective of the talents of the spin doctors whom the Labour party employs. My hon. Friend reminded us of the importance of the medical back-up for our military forces and what a tragedy it is that the Government have seen fit to close the last military hospital at Haslar.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) is not in the Chamber. I am sorry about that because I want to say some nice things about him, even if he is a Liberal. It does not happen very often. He gave us a fascinating insider's view, which I have not heard from anyone, of the shambles of the Bowman programme during the three and a half years until the Government cancelled it a short while ago.

Dr. Moonie: It has been going on for longer than that.

Mr. Davies: The contract with Archer dates from 1997 and has just been terminated by the Government. So for the whole period of the Archer contract, as every week and month went by, we cumulatively lost the £200 million of which the hon. Member for Eastleigh has reminded the House. It was the Minister or his colleagues who were responsible for that, and they cannot get away from it. I shall come back to that later because it is an important issue.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh also gave us a fascinating insight into the position of Vosper Thornycroft, which, in the light of the decisions announced today and the mishandling of the type 45 procurement, may well cease to be an option for the Ministry of Defence when it wishes to procure naval vessels. That is a serious matter.

I do not want to embarrass the hon. Member for Jarrow (Mr. Hepburn) by supporting him, but he made a devastating attack on the Government's procurement policy and today's announcement. Nothing that anyone on the Conservative Benches could say would be more eloquent than the speech made by the hon. Gentleman, who holds a different ideological and political point of view and comes from a different parliamentary tradition.

The great event of today—"great" is perhaps the wrong word; the important event of today—was the announcement of the Government's intentions with regard to procuring the roll on/roll off ferries. We all agree that they are vital, and agree with the need for naval strategic lift. The Government's decision had two particularly unsatisfactory aspects, the significance of which goes much wider than defence procurement or capability, and to the heart of the nature of the Government's relations with Parliament and the way in which the Government take decisions, present them to the public and account to the public for them, as they should do in a democracy. Both aspects are thoroughly unsatisfactory—and that is the mildest word that I can use.

First, we had one more case of an important announcement that was supposed to be made in Parliament being made first in the media. You were in the Chair at the time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and you expressed your personal concern and undertook to take the matter up from the Chair. You said all the right things, as much as you could. I have no illusions. I believe that Ministers will go home tonight sniggering as they walk away from the House into the darkness, thinking complacently that they have got away with it once again, and that nothing will happen to them. They will try it on a second, third, fourth and 500th time. That is the way of the Government, and it is lamentable.

The second unsatisfactory aspect of the affair is the way in which the decision has been taken and defended to the public. The implication—although I think it was more like a statement than an implication—of the Secretary of State's remarks was that the Government had no choice but to allow the bid to go to the lowest tenderer in the European Union. The implication was that the public procurement directive and the Treaty of European Union left the Government with no option. However, that is not true. The Government had a choice as to whether to go down the private finance initiative route or the public-private partnership route to procure the vessels.

The decision to take the PFI route meant that the private sector partner would become the nominal owner and the purchaser of the ship. Therefore, the public procurement directive would apply and the purchase would not be protected as a piece of Government procurement for military purposes. The Government took that decision,

[Mr. Davies]

but we do not know whether they were so incompetent and naive that it never occurred to them, when they decided on the PFI structure, that the inevitable consequence was that the order would have to be offered to competition throughout the European Union. If they did not know that or even think about it, on the basis of competence alone those on the Treasury Bench should not be there.

However—I fear that this might be so—if it was not a matter of competence but one of honesty and they knew perfectly well of the inexorable consequences of the route that they had chosen to go down and were determined to disguise them from Parliament and the public, they obviously behaved in an utterly unforgivable fashion. We may never know the answer, but Parliament is entitled to know which of those alternatives is true. There is no third, fourth or fifth logical possibility. One of the alternatives must be true and both are damning.

The Secretary of State seemed to cover himself against the possibility that we might find out the answer to my question by implying that the vessels did not qualify under the treaty for protection against the public procurement directive. I thought that it was not an accident but a little sinister that he either deliberately or inadvertently continued to use wrong and inappropriate terminology that is not relevant to this legal issue. He said that the roll on/roll off ferries were not "warlike vessels" and implied that they were not warships. Perhaps he hoped that the inference would be drawn that they would not be protected from the public procurement directive even if the Government had been their direct owner and operator.

Article 296 of the treaty appears after the section on single market legislation and it is relevant. It says that the Government must be open about their procurement within the Union on everything except the military equipment that is defined in the article. It says nothing about warlike vessels or warlike equipment, but refers to

products . . . intended for specifically military purposes.

These roll on/roll off ferries are intended explicitly for a specifically military purpose. Although they do not fire missiles, they will play a military role. Therefore, it is unarguable, according to the treaty, that had the Government procured them in the normal way, they could have protected that order. They could have given it to British shipyards had they wished to do so. I fear that they did not wish to do that, but that is what every other European nation would have done, as the hon. Member for Jarrow rightly said. The Government are in the business of bamboozling their own supporters as well as the employees of the shipyards involved. Those employees must be rightly furious at how they have been betrayed by the Government's announcement this afternoon.

The Government's whole procurement policy can be characterised in exactly the same way as the new Labour Administration can be characterised across the board. There is a facade that is initially and superficially attractive. However, once one looks behind that facade, one soon comes across the dry rot, the hypocrisy, the serious errors and—worse than that—the attempts to cover up those errors. When it comes to the high-profile, headline issues, everything seems fine. The Government are committed to the type 45 destroyers, to two new carriers, to the A400M and to Meteor. We have supported those decisions—I see the Secretary of State nodding—but only so long as they get them right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has asked a number of pertinent questions, not merely today but on previous occasions, about whether our continental partners will go ahead with projected orders for the A400M, and so forth—and, indeed, about how the type 45 destroyer procurement is proceeding. In principle, it sounds splendid. However, when one looks behind that, one sees not only great problems with individual items but that the Government have very cleverly so arranged things that they hardly have to spend one penny before the election. So, in fact, all the announcements of new orders and the comments on how they are minded to order this or that are hot air. We have yet to see any of it in reality.

When one goes behind such a facade into the day-to-day necessary procurement of equipment on which the effectiveness and lives of our fighting men and women will depend, one finds a very sad story of serious inadequacies and cover-ups. Let us look at the communications system for our combat aircraft. As we have seen in Kosovo, it is not compatible with the United States system.

Mr. Hoon: The Conservatives bought it.

Mr. Davies: The Secretary of State seems to think that every shortcoming in the services for which this Government have been responsible over the past three and a half years can somehow be laid at the door of the previous Conservative Government. We can all play that game; I could talk about the military inadequacies of the Government of Ramsay MacDonald. The fact is that the Secretary of State has responsibility and if he is to do something on the issue, he had better do it.

Mr. Hoon: I find the hon. Gentleman's observations absolutely astonishing. We have ordered secure air-to-air communications to replace the system that his Government purchased.

Mr. Davies: The system clearly is not in place at the moment.

What is more, the Secretary of State has been engaged in the GR1 to GR4 conversion programme. The matter has been in his hands for several years and he still has not got it right. Apparently, the software has still not been successfully integrated in order that GR4s can handle smart weaponry. After three and a half years, that is thoroughly unsatisfactory.

I know perfectly well that the need to replace Clansman has been with us for a long time, and do not doubt that serious errors were made by the previous Conservative Government. Heaven knows, my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and I wrote a pamphlet during the previous Parliament criticising the defence policy of the then Administration, so we can hardly be expected now to say that everything that they did was perfect. The important thing is that this Government do not delude themselves, as they are trying to delude the public, that they do not have responsibility for anything because somebody 10 or 15 years ago may or may not have made some mistake. They have responsibility now, and must get things right.

The Government have been working with Archer Communications Systems for the past three and a half years and confirmed as recently as March that they believed that it was the right partner to deliver the new Bowman system. Now, they have cancelled the contract and pulled away, losing £200 million. Every penny of that has been lost under this Administration. If the Secretary of State disagrees with that, he should intervene to say so.

I must ask many other questions. What is happening about the Tucanos—the RAF basic trainer? We are told that they are grounded and that our pilots are being sent to Australia for training. The Tucano has been perfectly all right for the first three years of the Labour Government. Are the Government going to say that that situation is the fault of some previous Conservative Administration?

The C130Js have been suffering several problems. They were ordered by the Conservative Government, but who has had problems with them flying in the past few months? The Government have done nothing at all. They have taken delivery of the aircraft, which are clearly not performing properly at low speed and low altitude.

The sonars for the Navy are a serious matter. Everyone agrees that the sonar 2193 is necessary for the Hunt class minesweepers, but when is it due to come on stream? It is at least two years behind, under the Labour Government. The sonar 2087 for the type 23 frigates is an even more important matter. As Ministers ought to know, no 2031s were fitted on the last five of the type 23s, on the grounds that the 2087 was coming along so rapidly that it would not be necessary to fit the 2031. We now have five type 23s that have no stern sonars whatever. As those frigates are supposed to be the essence of our anti-submarine capability, that is thoroughly unsatisfactory.

A further issue is the Eurofighter and the Eurofighter cannon. It was always intended that the Eurofighter would be procured with a cannon, and the Government did not cancel the cannon for the first batch of 55 Eurofighters. However, they decided that the pilots would not be trained and there would be no back-up for the operation of the cannon. A remarkable piece of military hardware was procured by the decision of the previous Conservative Administration and the Government have taken delivery of it, but the cannon will be completely inoperable. Pilots will be put into the aircraft and told that they will never be able to use part of the weapon system that is fitted. This is another case in which Ministers have been a great deal less than frank.

I raised the matter at the last Defence questions with the Minister for the Armed Forces, who said that the Eurofighter was not intended to have a ground attack role. However, in a written answer to me shortly afterwards, he had to confess that the Eurofighter was, among other things, a successor to the Jaguar, which of course has a ground attack role.

I do not believe that Ministers have begun to think through the issue. No one suggests that a cannon is required in a conventional dogfight, but there are many situations in which a cannon is extremely useful—against transport aircraft, for example, or against helicopters. Ministers do not seem to realise that current warfare is somewhat different from warfare 50 or 100 years ago. Often, the state of belligerence is uncertain and the rules of engagement are less than would be expected in a full-scale war.

A potentially hostile aircraft may intrude across a particular line into our airspace and refuse to respond when challenged. It may not be practicable or politically desirable to order the aircraft to be brought down by a missile such as the advanced medium-range air-to-air missile—AMRAAM—the advanced short-range air-to-air missile—ASRAAM—or Meteor. A shot from a cannon—the traditional shot across the bows, so to speak—may be exactly the response that is needed.

That aircraft was built with a wide range of flexible options for combat use, but the Government have simply removed one of those. They pretend to the House and the public that no damage is done and it does not matter. It is absurd that the next batches of the Eurofighter Typhoon will have a lead weight to replace the cannon. In no circumstances can the removal of the cannon be justified by the other capabilities or the longer range that the aircraft can achieve as a result.

That is not a zero sum. It is a minus sum conclusion, which is typical of the Government's procurement policy. They thought that it was a small detail that no one would notice. When it came out, they used every trick—

Ms Squire: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Davies:—to try to deflect attention from the facts.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order.

Mr. Davies: That is all too typical—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. When the Chair takes a point of order, the hon. Gentleman must sit down at once.

Ms Squire: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have always understood that the time available at the end of a debate would be equally shared between the Opposition and the Government, but the Opposition spokesman has exceeded his time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: In this instance, that is not the case.

Mr. Davies: Had the hon. Lady been better informed, she would have known that I was under instructions to speak until 6.45 pm, which I propose to do.

Over and over again, it is the same story. We have the spin, and over and over again the reality is different. The reality is tawdry. The reality is the Government's shortcomings, and the worst reality of all is the systematic way in which they try to cover them up.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): My opportunity to reply to the debate seems to have been a long time coming. The argument of the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), appears to be that basically, everything is all our fault, for taking so long to clear up the mess that the Conservative Government left us. That appears to be the logic of the arguments advanced by Opposition Members. I apologise; it is taking a long time to clear up the mess that they left us—but that is because the Conservative Government left us with such a mess.

[Dr. Lewis Moonie]

Almost every system mentioned by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), who replied on behalf of the Opposition, was yet another painful example of the mess in which the previous Government left defence procurement. It is taking us longer than we might have hoped to clear things up. That is a sign of the magnitude of the task facing us.

In opening the debate, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State covered some very important ground. He spoke about how we are ensuring that our armed forces will continue to have the equipment that they need. He talked about what we are doing to address the problems of time and cost overruns that have bedevilled Ministry of Defence equipment programmes too often in the past.

My right hon. Friend described the scale of our investment in the future of our armed forces and in our economy. He highlighted many of the impressive programmes of new world-beating equipment which will be coming into service over the next few years. It is a matter of concern and regret to me that some hon. Members and parts of the media try to present a different picture—one that says that the equipment on which our armed forces depend is not up to the job. That is untrue. Our service men and women and their families deserve better than to have their confidence in their equipment undermined by inaccurate and misleading remarks.

Yes, we inherited problems with, for example, the Bowman project and the SA80 rifle. However, we are taking decisive action to sort them out. Those are the exceptions. The standard of our forces' equipment in general is overwhelmingly excellent.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Most of that was ordered by the previous Government, whom the Minister attacked.

Dr. Moonie: As well as apportioning blame, I am prepared to apportion credit. The hon. Gentleman is right. On some occasions the Conservative Government ordered things that worked well, and we are fortunate that they did. Many of the other things that they ordered have not worked quite so well.

Shortly, I shall move on to quickly cover as many points as I can. After an hour of questions from the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, I shall not be able to answer them all in 10 minutes. I shall ditch the rest of what I intended to say that was on the formal side. There is a two-day defence debate next week, and with a bit of luck I shall then have longer to cover various matters. If a Minister makes a habit of doing this, Members will always expect him to do so. In fact, he is summing up for the Government and not necessarily replying to the debate. However, I let that pass.

I shall deal first with the Defence Procurement Agency and the Defence Logistics Organisation. They are both relatively new organisations and it is interesting to speculate how things may emerge over time. There are no plans in progress to consider their position in the immediate future.

I shall now talk about the Brimstone weapon, and I shall occasionally refer to notes because that is much easier than trying to remember everything. We always keep the mix of weapons available to us under review. We have reviewed the number of Brimstones that we require and we plan to buy 25 per cent. fewer. I think that I answered a question on the matter recently. There is still a firm requirement for the weapon. As Brimstone will be one of a number of anti-armour weapons available in a future conflict, including the attack helicopter and the MR anti-tank guided weapon, we have assessed that we shall need fewer Brimstones, hence the adjustment in the procurement. I am happy to say—even though the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green will probably try to claim the credit again—that the Brimstone programme is on target and on cost.

I thought that I had adequately covered the subject of proposed reductions in squadrons of front-line aircraft during the broadcast a few weeks ago, but I shall reiterate. There was a study paper. We produce many such papers and many of them never see the light of day, which is fortunate, because we would be unable to comment properly on all of them, as happened in the case in question. The studies cover the full range of planned equipment capability and establish the scope or lack thereof for significant changes in our forward equipment plans. The paper was not seen by Ministers—at least, not until after it had been leaked.

I can confirm that no recommendations have been made to us, still less any decisions taken, to cut any of our fast jet fleets. It is impossible, and it would be irresponsible of me, to say that nothing will ever change. When Eurofighter is introduced, existing aeroplanes will be replaced. That is only logical—no one would expect us to keep obsolete equipment in service once the new aircraft was in operation. However, that issue will be examined at the proper time. The paper posed hypothetical questions; they will not be answered in the immediate future, but when Eurofighter is in service and it becomes necessary to make decisions on how to plan reductions in the alternative aircraft that we use.

I shall talk about the type 45 later. Several speakers referred to it, and I have some detailed notes further on in my script.

The failure of the Lynx helicopter rotor hub posed considerable problems. However, operational requirements are being met and, although people are having to queue up for training, they are being trained. A tremendous job of work is being done by the people replacing the defective part, and they deserve our congratulations.

We have every confidence that the SA80 upgrade plan will satisfy all the requirements. It is thought that some of the initial work might be done in Nottingham, but most will be carried out in the factory in Germany. After all, it is essential that the work be done as quickly as possible. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Ms Ward) that we expect at least 20,000 weapons to have been fully modified and to be back in service by the end of next year, when I am sure they will make a considerable difference.

A difficult decision had to be made about the future missile, Meteor. There were many factors, especially the fact that smart procurement had identified a route through Meteor for procuring the missile which we thought produced considerable advantages for us, especially in terms of the balance of risk.

To digress for a moment, let me say that one of the major problems affecting large projects of the sort that we are discussing is the allocation of risk. Until the

introduction of smart procurement, which we hope is redressing the balance, the Government took all the risk. That cannot be right. I believe that smart procurement—smart acquisition, as I must learn to call it—will redress the balance and lay more of the risk where it belongs, on the contractors carrying out the development work for us. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) has noticed that I have answered one of the points that he raised.

Progress is being made on the development of the A400M. I know of no snags, nor of cold feet affecting any of our partners, at the moment. We must expect progress to be slow at first and then to take off after the initial configuration and the initial agreements have been finalised. We are satisfied with the progress that is being made now.

OCCAR will offer considerable benefits to us in the medium to long term, providing a much more rational basis for the selection of projects, and allowing a multinational element and as much co-operation as is needed to ensure that highly complex and often expensive projects are brought to fruition in the minimum time.

We have not yet decided what form the sale of DERA will take. Hon. Members may say—as happened in an Adjournment debate shortly before the summer recess—that someone has told them that things are not very good and that they are not happy, but no one comes to us and says that. Therefore, we must assume that what the Americans are telling us is true and that they are happy with the system that we have proposed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) said that hard decisions have to be made and, ideally, made quickly. However, a balance must be struck between wasting money through too early a cancellation and wasting it through too late a cancellation. Sometimes the balance of opinion, as in Bowman, is to carry on a little longer to try to obtain a satisfactory outcome. In other words, a bit of good money is thrown after what has gone before in the hope of a successful outcome. It is not all dead cost. People are employed using that money. The fact that the work does not ultimately come to fruition does not mean that the money was all thrown away or burned. It was spent on development and it kept people in employment, and we should not forget that. I hope that we shall be able to make an announcement soon on the chosen vehicle for producing the system.

The hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) referred to many problems. I have covered his points on smart procurement. I shall have to look into the matter of the floating dock. I did not think that we had any other docks floating around, but I am sure that someone will put me right and I shall be able to reply to the hon. Gentleman.

One of the major purchasing decisions of the next decade concerns the future large aircraft, along with the carriers. It is essential that we get that right. A huge sum of money will have to be spent. We are not yet in a position to make such a decision, but I hope that, during the next few years, as our debates on procurement evolve, so will our position on the purchase of such an aircraft.

The vertical communication system is based on the Duro vehicle which was proposed to the competitors because no other vehicle has the configuration to take the system and still be transportable by air.

Mr. Keetch: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Moonie: I am sorry, but I do not have sufficient time.

The matter has been extensively investigated within and outside the EC and no equivalent vehicle of sufficient size is available. However, the vehicle will be sourced through a British distributor and spares will be purchased accordingly.

I join the hon. Gentleman in his congratulations to Swan Hunter. The news was excellent and I wish the yard a long and successful future. Its apprentices were mentioned, and that afforded me particular pleasure.

I must mention ro-ro ferries. The Opposition have created a smokescreen to try to conceal what is a good deal. We should not forget that as this is a PFI project, we are talking about a whole life cost. It will cost more than £900 million during its life, and there is no doubt that that offers a staggering saving over any of the other options. I suspect that that is why the previous Government intended to go down exactly the same route.

The ships will be built in Germany, not Poland. However, I do not see why we should object to Poles building them, as many hon. Members hope to welcome Poland into the EC. We should not forget that had we taken any other route, the cost would have been greater, and that would have meant less money to spend on something else.

I have the greatest of sympathy with those who will lose their jobs as a result of the decision on Bowman. We are aware of the problems that have been raised about Vospers, and we are considering them. So far, they are not sufficient to cause us anxiety. I believe that hon. Members are becoming over-anxious, but we will consider the matter closely. The problem with the contracting system is that one has to trust the system. We do not simply rely on people's word; we include checks to ensure that it is implemented properly.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

War Graves Commission

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

7 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I am pleased to have an opportunity to raise a subject that is of great interest to my constituents and those of many other hon. Members. I know that it is of interest to the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), who will make a brief intervention at the conclusion of my remarks, with your permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I pay tribute to the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the men and women who work for it, including those who are employed as gardeners, especially the British gardeners. Those who visit the CWGC's many cemeteries all over the world are always struck by the fact that they are beautifully kept. I imagine that, over the years, many relatives of those who lie there have drawn comfort from that.

Many people who visit the cemeteries come into contact with the British gardeners. I have had that experience because in the summer of 1999, my family and I visited cemeteries around Vimy ridge and looked for the graves of two family members who were lost during the great war. We met and were helped by one of the commission's British gardeners. I can say from first-hand experience how helpful they are to visitors to the cemeteries.

British gardeners overseas play an important role in the upkeep of the cemeteries and the arrangements for them. I do not decry in any way the local gardeners who are employed by the commission. I pay tribute to their work and dedication. However, I believe that it is important to keep up the British connection, not least because the British gardeners are often responsible for the training and supervision of the local gardeners. The British gardeners have generally been trained in this country and they are therefore steeped in the high standards of British gardening. The existing arrangements work well.

Against that background, I want to speak about the changes in the allowance payments for the 70 or so British gardeners that the commission employs. The remuneration that they receive is fairly complicated and has to be viewed as a package. The changes that the commission has proposed are not to the gardeners' basic salary but to their overseas allowance, which is a substantial part of their income.

The Minister may be able to confirm that the majority of British gardeners will experience a reduction in their incomes as a result of the changes. Those suffering a reduction in incomes will include all the British gardeners who work in northern Europe. For some, the reduction will amount to as much as £7,500 a year, phased in by reductions of £1,500 a year. The commission admits that, last year, British gardeners earned between £19,000 and £29,000 in total through their basic pay and allowance. It is therefore clear that many gardeners face a substantial reduction in their income. They pay tax, or the equivalent of tax, on the basic pay component of their package.

In addition to the remuneration that I described, the gardeners receive an accommodation allowance of £6,000 a year. That reflects the fact that they can be—and often are—required by the commission to move anywhere in the world. They also receive a boarding school allowance, of which few take advantage.

There has been some comment about remuneration. In view of the job that those involved do, this is not inordinate and I think they are worth every penny of it. That is my view; I suspect that it may be the view of many others. The key point is that the gardeners are facing a substantial reduction in their incomes. This amounts to a disturbance to the arrangements of care of the CWGC cemeteries. A Transport and General Workers Union survey suggested that 10 per cent. of the staff in question are already considering leaving the employment of the CWGC. I recently met Peter Magee, the head gardener at CWGC cemeteries around Hanover. He told me that since the proposals were announced by the commission, many staff had left.

Against that background, I welcome the setting up of an independent inquiry under Baroness Dean to look into the issues. I appreciate that these issues concern the CWGC. I appreciate the relationship between that body and the MOD and the fact that the Secretary of State is the chairman of the CWGC.

I wish to refer one or two matters to the Minister. Will he do all he can to ensure that the inquiry takes place before Remembrance Sunday? I hope that this is dealt with urgently, for obvious reasons. Is he in a position to put a figure on the savings that will be made by the commission as a result of the proposals? Above all else, will he give an assurance that he shares my concern about retaining the connection between the cemeteries and this country through the maintenance of the existing level of UK gardeners looking after the cemeteries? The British connection is very important and we should keep up the number of British gardeners looking after those cemeteries.

There is a great deal of public interest in this issue. I give credit to *The Mirror* for its extensive and excellent coverage of the issue. In my view, the existing arrangements have worked well. The cemeteries are beautifully kept and a fitting memorial to the brave men who lie in them. The cemeteries mean a great deal to many people in this country; they should matter to us all. I hope that all of those who come to decide about the future of the gardeners will remember that.

7.7 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): With the agreement of the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) and my hon. Friend the Minister—it was agreed that I could try to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I want to buttress the points made so effectively by the hon. Gentleman who initiated the debate, for which we should all be grateful.

At the invitation of my trade union, the TGWU, I went—at my own expense, incidentally—to Albert and Ypres in the summer to meet the trade union representatives, shop stewards and gardeners who are members of the TGWU and the civil service unions. The numbers of British expatriate staff have been eroded by a number of economic pressures. I wanted to share with them my fairly well-known interest in the Ypres salient and the first world war.

I was deeply concerned at the danger that if the reductions in the allowances are allowed to go ahead, it will accelerate the erosion or haemorrhaging of these

expatriate staff who, as the hon. Member for Hertsmere indicated, do more than gardening. They provide the essential Britishness of those wonderful cemeteries.

That has to be borne in mind by the chairman of the CWGC, and by the commission itself. It is essential that the allowance is maintained. The quality of the commitment given by the French, Belgian and German staff is second to none, but the British staff are able to communicate the standards that are expected and train the staff. I have to say that they are on relatively low pay. They are not seeking more. That which they have, they wish to hold. That is what each and every one of us in this place does. Members of the Government who were trade union officials know that that is a legitimate basic tenet.

We have stumbled into this situation with some carelessness. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will reassure us that Baroness Dean will complete her inquiry with the utmost expedition and that in the meantime there will be no movement on revising the terms and conditions of the staff. I hope that Baroness Dean will be able to take into account various factors, including the fact that spouses invariably have very low earning capacity, as they often have no command of the local language, and the fact that, although the children can go to school in the United Kingdom, that cannot be taken up by people on moderate or low pay, because of the on-costs.

My hon. Friend may say that the newspapers have exaggerated or misunderstood. With respect, the matter came to a head in the summer and assurances could and should have been given then. The Dean inquiry should not have been set up so late. This debate should not have been necessary.

We are looking with enthusiasm for my hon. Friend to redress the situation. The problem underscores the need for a veterans Minister, who could deal with many issues, such as Japanese prisoner-of-war camp survivors and Gulf war syndrome. We have seen for the best part of today that my hon. Friend has other things on his plate. I hope that he will deal with this matter and that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will reflect on the Royal British Legion's request to have a dedicated veterans Minister. That would help us to avoid such misunderstandings in the future.

7.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on securing this debate. I welcome the opportunity to pay tribute to the service men and women of the Empire and Commonwealth who gave their lives during the two world wars; to express the Government's appreciation of the splendid work done by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in maintaining their graves and memorials; and to correct some errors and misapprehensions that have abounded in recent months.

The hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) made some specific points. On the timing of the inquiry, we would have hoped to finish it as early as possible, but it will not be possible to complete it by 11 November. We felt strongly that Baroness Dean was the most suitable person to conduct the inquiry. Unfortunately, there are time constraints and people are not always available early on to give quite as much of their time as one would have hoped. The inquiry will be completed as expeditiously as possible within those constraints. I can also confirm that there will be no movement on allowances until this matter has been resolved.

I do not have a figure for the savings, but I can easily find it and supply it to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Adjournment debates are not for interventions from Front-Bench spokesmen.

Dr. Moonie: The scale of the sacrifice made by the armed forces of the Empire and Commonwealth during the world wars is overwhelming. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission maintains over 1.179 million war graves at 23,204 burial sites in 146 countries and commemorates a further 761,000 war dead on memorials to the missing. It is both our duty and our privilege to ensure that the memory of all those who gave their lives is honoured in perpetuity. For more than 80 years, that duty has been faithfully carried out by the CWGC. I can give a cast-iron guarantee tonight that that will remain its sole objective and that nothing will be allowed to diminish it, now or in the future.

Most people will have a clear mental picture of a typical war graves cemetery, with row on row of clean white headstones, neatly trimmed grass and carefully tended flowers, shrubs and trees. They are a regular sight on our televisions at this time of year, and will be familiar to anyone who, like me, has travelled in the areas of intense fighting, such as northern France and Flanders. Those of us who have visited a war graves cemetery and seen the work of the CWGC at close hand will have a still clearer appreciation of its quality, and will also have experienced the sympathetic and helpful attitude of the CWGC staff.

Gardening has always been an essential part of the CWGC's work. Even before the commission was formally set up in 1917, the Army graves registration commission was trying to make burial grounds on the western front less bleak by growing grass, flowers, shrubs and trees in them. As the work of the CWGC evolved after the first world war, architects and horticulturists worked closely together on the overall design of cemeteries. The aim behind the design of a war graves cemetery is to give the effect of a garden rather than the usual concept of a cemetery, and to combine the various elements in a way that will help the visitor to achieve a sense of peace in a beautiful and serene setting.

There have recently been reports in the press that the British expatriate gardeners employed by the CWGC are facing pay cuts. It has been repeatedly alleged that that is the result of Ministry of Defence penny-pinching. It has been claimed that the gardeners' livelihoods are threatened, and even that this is a ploy to get rid of British gardeners and replace them with cheaper local staff, even though, for as long as anyone can remember, the gardens have been tended by a mixture of local and British staff.

The fear has been spread that this will result in the disappearance of friendly faces at CWGC cemeteries overseas, and that standards of maintenance will fall.

[Dr. Moonie]

These reports have led to a flow of letters from members of the public, who are understandably concerned and disgusted by what has been presented as a betrayal of our war dead. However, their concern is based on false information. Both the CWGC and the Ministry of Defence have made efforts to put the record straight, including interviews and letters to the press, but reporting on this issue remains grossly distorted.

I shall deal first with the most important element of this issue, which has unfortunately caused a degree of alarm due to erroneous reporting—the question whether the high standards of maintenance and the observance of care and attention, and the respect that we are used to affording our war dead, are jeopardised by any form of allowance changes, or changes in resource allocations, or any other form of budget changes.

The answer to that question is no. This Government will not do anything that could be construed as failing to ensure that our war dead are not properly commemorated, honoured and respected. Equally, the commission has given an absolute assurance that the high standards at cemeteries and memorials around the world will be maintained. I hope that this reiteration of our position will reassure relatives and all of us who are eager to ensure that we meet fully our moral responsibilities towards those service men and women who gave their lives for the sake of others.

It may be helpful if I outline the official position of the Ministry of Defence in its relations with the CWGC. The commission is a Commonwealth organisation established by royal charter. Although my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence is its chairman, and the hon. Members for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) are on its board, it is not a branch or agency of the Ministry of Defence, and the British Government do not control its organisation or internal affairs.

Mr. Clappison: Before the Minister speaks about the structure of the CWGC, is he able to give the reassurance that I seek about the British connection with regard to those who look after the cemeteries? Will the number of British gardeners involved in the care of the cemeteries be maintained? I think that that question also concerns the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay).

Dr. Moonie: I shall come to that point a little later.

Mr. Mackinlay: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Moonie: Very well.

Mr. Mackinlay: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, as I have question about misleading information on the CWGC's website. I fully accept that he and the Ministry of Defence have acted wholly honourably in this matter. He said that misleading information had been published in the national press in this country, yet the CWGC's website states:

> All this is tax free and represents a very generous package in recognition of the excellent work they carry out.

However, the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) has pointed out that the package is not tax free, and that a payment in lieu of tax is involved. The CWGC—not my hon. Friend the Minister, nor the Ministry—has therefore aggravated the situation and deliberately misled people.

Dr. Moonie: Had my hon. Friend been a little more patient, he would have found that I was coming on to that very point. Just in case I forget, let me say in passing that the figures that were quoted for total income are net of the contribution made in lieu of income tax. So the figure that the hon. Member for Hertsmere gave me as gardeners' total remuneration is not subjected to any further deduction. I can give him that absolute guarantee.

The proposed changes to the remuneration of the gardeners have been reported, among other descriptions, as

> the work of MOD pen-pushers trying to please their masters by shaving a few bob off the War Graves Commission budget.

That is totally untrue. The six member Governments who are represented on the commission contribute to costs in proportion to the number of graves of their war dead. The United Kingdom bears nearly 78 per cent. of the cost, which currently amounts to some £24 million. This money is paid by the Ministry of Defence as a grant in aid. There are no plans to change this arrangement, nor to reduce the level of our funding.

This is not a pay cut, of course, and I fully accept that the hon. Member for Hertsmere made no attempt to describe it as such. In other words, although the gardeners' pay is not being affected, the total remuneration package is. I would not try to pretend otherwise. I am not simply splitting hairs. A pay cut, to most people in my constituency, has a very specific meaning—it implies a cut in salary, not in allowances.

The proposed changes are to local allowances and affect all the CWGC's United Kingdom-based staff serving overseas, not just the gardeners. The allowances are intended to enable these staff to maintain a standard of living broadly equivalent to that which they would have in the United Kingdom. The CWGC's local allowances were based on the United Kingdom civil service cost of living allowance—COLA—with modifications to suit staff's individual circumstances.

In 1998, the need arose to change the arrangements because there were no longer civil service-wide rates of COLA on which the allowances could be based. In common with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the British Council, the CWGC decided to use a human resource consultancy to provide cost of living data on which new arrangements could be based. The consultants created a shopping basket system, weighted according to purchasing patterns drawn from the United Kingdom family expenditure survey. From cost of living surveys carried out twice a year, the consultants produce an index of the percentage difference in the cost of living between the United Kingdom and the host country. The index is applied to spendable income to produce the cost of living uplift required for everyday expenses.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch) *rose—*

Dr. Moonie: In addition to the COLA element, local allowances under the new system will include a child addition, a telephone addition, a utilities element and an expatriate allowance. It is wrong to suggest that the

United Kingdom-based gardeners overseas will be unable to maintain a decent standard of living under the proposed arrangements. The CWGC employs 67 United Kingdom-based gardeners out of a total gardening staff of nearly 900. The nine most junior earn between £18,000 and £20,000 a year. Another 28 earn between £20,000 and £25,000, and the remaining 30 earn between £25,000 and £29,000.

In addition, an accommodation allowance of up to £6,000 is paid, and those wishing to educate their children in the United Kingdom, as is common for expatriate staff, receive a boarding school allowance of up to £16,000 for each child. In every case, basic pay and allowances are tax-free. As I have said, the total figure is produced net because account is taken of the deduction that has already been made.

Mr. Cryer: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Moonie: No, I am sorry, I do not have time.

By comparison, a gardener working in the west midlands earns about £13,000 a year before tax, and about £9,600 after tax deductions. Even after the proposed reductions, expatriate gardeners undoubtedly have considerably more take-home income than gardeners in the United Kingdom.

As local allowances are designed to maintain a United Kingdom standard of living, they will vary with changes in exchange rates and in local costs of living. Some changes will be upwards and some downwards. The examples that have been quoted in the press are at the end of the downward spectrum.

The impact of the new system varies from an annual increase of £4,500—admittedly for very few staff—to a decrease of £7,500, depending on location and individual circumstances. A great part of that reduction is due to the strength of sterling and would also have occurred under the old system.

I do not think that anyone present is suggesting that allowances for currency fluctuations should not be made periodically. That has always been the accepted practice. To be fair, the deductions are largely being caused by the currency fluctuations. To ease the transition, the CWGC proposes to phase the reductions over a period so that no one's income will be reduced by more than £1,500 in any one year. Admittedly, that is a substantial sum.

There is no truth in the suggestion that the commission is trying to drive out the British gardeners and replace them with cheaper substitutes. As I said, even under the new arrangements the net income of an expatriate gardener will compare favourably with what he might receive for similar work at home.

The CWGC has refuted any suggestion that future standards will be jeopardised by a revision of the allowance system. Maintenance of the graves and memorials to the highest standards and a sympathetic and helpful approach to visitors are at the very heart of theworking ethos of CWGC staff, whatever their nationality.

The expatriate British gardeners undoubtedly deserve the greatest credit for the standard of their work, but the suggestion that only they have the skills and dedication to maintain that standard is an insult to the many indigenous gardeners we employ through the commission. At many cemeteries, in particular in Italy, there are no British gardeners. One is not suggesting that they are not maintained to the same standards.

Mr. Clappison *indicated dissent.*

Dr. Moonie: I am not suggesting for a moment that the hon. Gentleman suggested that. I am referring to many of the inaccurate reports that have appeared in the past few weeks, which have served only to upset people unnecessarily. One of my colleagues was telephoned by a woman who was in tears because of the effect that the changes would have on her husband's grave, which is in Italy in a cemetery where there are no British gardeners anyway. That is the sort of disturbance that inaccurate reporting produces. It is not helpful to people who may well have a good cause. That is why we are pleased to be able to say that the commission has agreed to an independent inquiry into the procedures, to find out whether they are fair and justified and what should be done, under the chairmanship of Baroness Dean.

Mr. Clappison: Is the Minister now in a position to give me the assurance that I was seeking about maintaining the British connection in the number of British gardeners looking after the cemeteries?

Dr. Moonie: Clearly, the gardeners do not work for me, so I cannot give a guarantee. However, the commission has told us that it has no plans to reduce the number of British gardeners working abroad. *[Interruption.]* The shadow defence spokesman, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), may sneer, but one has to take the word of people when they are asked whether they intend to do something. I am satisfied that their intentions in this case are honourable, whatever the effects of their acts might be.

We have announced that the commission has decided to hold an independent review of the pay and allowances of the gardeners and other UK-based staff overseas. There will be full consultation with the staff and their representatives. Any changes will be delayed until the review has been completed. I am glad that a woman of such experience as Baroness Dean of Thornton-le-Fylde is to conduct the inquiry for us.

The commission and its staff do a superb job in maintaining the war grave cemeteries and so perpetuating the memory of the fallen. Both this Government and the commission will ensure that that remains the case.

We welcome the review, which will help to ensure that the public have confidence that the highest standards will be maintained in faithfully meeting our moral responsibilities, and that all those involved are fairly rewarded. It would be in the best interests of the review to allow it to be conducted as expeditiously as possible and, preferably, without any further external pressure and misrepresentation.

Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Hertsmere on securing this debate and I hope that I have managed to provide him with the limited reassurances that I have been able to give.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 30 October 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

AWE Aldermaston

2. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): How many job losses there have been at AWE Aldermaston since the new management consortium took over responsibility. [132985]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I begin by apologising to you, Mr. Speaker, and to other Members of the House, for the absence of the Under-Secretary of State for Defence. I know that he set off to get here, but he has not yet arrived.

As at 16 October, a total of 197 jobs had been lost at the Atomic Weapons Establishment since 1 April under the voluntary redundancy scheme introduced by the new management contractor and approval has been given to a further 34 applications.

Mr. Rendel: I am sure that the Secretary of State has seen the recent report by the Environment Agency, which raised the concern that the company could not maintain proper environmental and safety standards. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm, should the redundancy programme go ahead, that he has taken measures to ensure that redundancies will not cause environmental or safety concerns?

Mr. Hoon: I am surprised by the hon. Gentleman's comment. During the past three months, positive reports were published by Her Majesty's inspector of nuclear installations and the Environment Agency for England and Wales. The Environment Agency said:

> Arrangements for the management control of radioactive wastes at AWE and also the training of employees are good.

It also said that the initial impact of the new management systems, especially the environmental management systems, were

> promising, and could potentially fully meet overall requirements in the near future.

The Environment Agency gave a positive report on the first three months of operation of the new management contractor.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that throughout the country there are fears—BSE and the rail crisis, for example—about the possibility that information has been hidden and that staffing requirements may be cut? Will he give an assurance that no hidden secrets about Aldermaston will suddenly emerge, and that safety is absolutely paramount?

Mr. Hoon: With regard to that operation, safety is absolutely paramount. I assure my hon. Friend that the contractor's obligations include the need to satisfy the Ministry of Defence and independent regulators about safety considerations and that that will remain the case. I give him the assurance that he seeks.

KFOR

3. **Mr. Julian Brazier** (Canterbury): What plans he has to meet the Russian Defence Minister to discuss KFOR. [132986]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I have invited the Russian Defence Minister to visit the United Kingdom in early December. I would expect discussions to address a range of issues, certainly including events in the Balkans.

Mr. Brazier: Will the Secretary of State join me in praising the role of the Russians in securing the ceasing of hostilities in Kosovo? There is now a democratically elected Government in Yugoslavia, who are calling on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to accept their terms, which were that Kosovo should remain part of Serbia and that some of their troops should be allowed to return to the region. In that delicate, difficult and dangerous situation, the role and the good will of the Russians will be crucial in the attempt to find a peaceful way forward.

Mr. Hoon: I agree—unusually, if I may say so—with the hon. Gentleman, who rightly praised the Russians for their contribution and emphasised the role that they can play in determining the necessary constitutional arrangements in Serbia.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Will my right hon. Friend share with the House information on some of the events that followed the sinking of the submarine Kursk? Many of us followed those tragic events during the summer with increasing horror. What part has the Royal Navy played, and what part will it play in the effort to recover bodies from the submarine?

Mr. Hoon: I make it clear that we are not playing a part in the recovery of bodies. As soon as we became aware of the problem, we offered to help. Early preparations were undertaken in advance of a specific request from the Russian authorities for assistance so that we should be able to respond as quickly as possible. Having made those contingency arrangements, we were able to move as quickly as possible to the scene of the tragedy.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Kosovo is only one place in which our defence forces are committed.

Does the Secretary of State agree that they are being asked to do ever more but that they are being given fewer facilities and people with which to operate?

Mr. Hoon: I recognise that the world is an increasingly dangerous place and that recently British forces have played a significant part around the world addressing those dangers. This time last year, at about the time that I assumed my present ministerial position, overstretch was a problem in the British armed forces. We immediately examined ways in which to reduce that and to significantly reduce the numbers on operation in the Balkans. That significantly reduced the level of activity. However, the hon. Gentleman is right—we continue to look carefully at the engagements in which we should become involved and ensure that overstretch is at the top of the list of considerations that we take into account.

Deployment

6. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): If he will make a statement on the deployment of United Kingdom armed forces since 28 July. [132990]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): Since 28 July, the United Kingdom armed forces have continued their operational deployments in support of international efforts in Bosnia, Kosovo and the Gulf. On 10 October, the UK also announced an enhancement to our deployment in support of the Government of Sierra Leone.

As well as a number of short-term deployments worldwide on exercises and other routine military activity, the UK continues to contribute military personnel to United Nations operations in Cyprus, Georgia, Sierra Leone, East Timor and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and on the Iraq-Kuwait border.

Mr. Mackinlay: Many of those examples would have justified a statement in the House, but for the inordinately long recess.

Will the Minister now make a definitive statement? We have a right to know, and a duty to ask, what were the circumstances relating to the taking of soldiers in the Royal Irish Regiment as hostages in Sierra Leone. It resulted in a skilful, professional and brave rescue attempt, which, tragically, involved the loss of British soldiers' lives.

We note that Major Alan Marshall is not to be court-martialled. That may be correct, if he is innocent; if, on the other hand, he is guilty of mistakes, perhaps he should be court-martialled. It is certainly wrong for him to be produced if he was, in fact, following orders.

I think it is time that the House of Commons was told, with clarity and precision, exactly what happened, and what Major Marshall's orders were.

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend will probably have observed that Major Marshall had to have a meeting with the Commander-in-Chief, Land, General Jackson—

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): That would not have been a pleasant occasion.

Mr. Spellar: As usual, the right hon. and learned Gentleman treats the matter lightly. I do not think that Major Marshall treated it lightly.

There was no breach of military law, and therefore no requirement for a court martial. There was an error of judgment; on the other hand, following the capture Major Marshall behaved superbly, with great care and concern not only for his own men but for the other, Sierra Leonean hostages. I think that the balance was right, and that this is appropriately a judgment for the Army military authorities.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): How many British troops have been deployed on courses training them to drive fuel tankers since 28 July? Is this the best use of military personnel? Is it not the kind of sabre-rattling that is likely to inflame industrial relations, rather than calming them down?

Mr. Spellar: I am interested to learn that a Conservative Member believes that a Government should not make appropriate contingency arrangements to secure and safeguard vital supplies to maintain the country.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Has my hon. Friend heard the statements from those on the Opposition Front Bench hinting that we should not be in Sierra Leone, but should leave the people there to their fate, and hinting that we should not have gone into Kosovo to get rid of Milosevic? Is it not a fact that, in regard to overseas deployment, the Conservative party is now the most isolationist party in Europe?

Mr. Speaker: Order. As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is not the business of the Minister to worry about the Conservative party.

Mr. MacShane: Would the Minister agree—in condemning, in passing, the isolationism of the Conservative party—with the American Defence Secretary's statement fully supporting, ungrudgingly and wholeheartedly, the European defence initiative led by this country and opposed by the isolationists on the Opposition Benches?

Mr. Spellar: Obviously, I find myself in some degree of agreement with my hon. Friend. He is right to draw attention to the current Conservative party's tendency—perhaps acquired from some of the ultra wings of opinion in the United States—towards isolationism rather than constructive engagement with the world. I am afraid that that tendency is symptomatic of a deeper development in the Conservative party, which will ensure that it stays on the Opposition Benches for a very long time.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Can we get back to the facts? Will the Minister confirm whether 1,000 troops have been deployed for training to drive oil tankers and whether the Government have ordered the stockpiling of fuel in military depots? Are those men volunteers and on what legal basis has the action been carried out: is it under the Emergency Powers Acts, or under military aid to the civil community; and, if the latter, who made the request?

Mr. Spellar: I should have thought—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] It is much easier to answer when Opposition Members are not shouting. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would agree that it is absolutely prudent and right to make contingency plans for circumstances in which the civil authorities request the military forces to

train a number of personnel to undertake such tasks which are necessary to maintain the supply of essential services to the nation. We have prudently and contingently been training troops and, according to current progress, I estimate that, after the 60-day period, the number trained will approach 1,000. They will be trained to undertake necessary tasks in the event of a breakdown of order resulting in the ordinary civilian groups that would normally undertake those tasks being unable to do so, and the civil authorities requesting that we do so.

Chinook Crash

7. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will hold a new inquiry into the circumstances leading to the crash of Chinook ZD576 on the Mull of Kintyre in 1994. [132991]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Government have always made it clear that if new evidence were to come to light, it would be examined with scrupulous care, thoroughness and compassion. To date, we have seen nothing that causes us to doubt the integrity of the verdict of the RAF board of inquiry, or that would prompt us to hold a new inquiry.

Mr. Swayne: Given the volume of new evidence that has emerged, especially in connection with the software involved, and the number of eminent persons who have expressed disquiet about the verdict, is it not now time to reopen the matter? After all, would it not clear the air? What is the Ministry of Defence attempting to hide?

Mr. Hoon: The MOD is not attempting to hide anything. I have examined every single submission made to the Ministry on the subject. There is certainly a mass of material, but none of it discloses any new evidence as such. I accept that many people who have looked at the evidence have said that they would have reached a different conclusion from the one reached by the board of inquiry, but that is not a sufficient reason to overturn a board of inquiry and order a new one. Only if there was real, relevant new evidence would that be the appropriate course of action.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): Is the Secretary of State aware of the extreme disquiet felt by hon. Members on both sides of the House and in the other place about whether we can really have a verdict based on blaming the dead? Will he come with an open mind to next month's meeting with the Mull of Kintyre group?

Mr. Hoon: I do have an open mind on the subject. I have set out what I consider to be the proper course to adopt, which is that it is not right to disturb the finding of the original board of inquiry in the absence of any significant new evidence, or because it is possible for different people, perfectly properly and with an entirely open mind, to reach different conclusions. Only if it could be shown that there was new evidence would it be right to reopen the board of inquiry. I certainly have an open mind in respect of new evidence becoming available.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): How does my right hon. Friend square what he has just said—that different people can reasonably come to different conclusions—with the Ministry of Defence's position that, if the pilots are dead, it is wrong to blame them unless there is absolutely no doubt that they are responsible? If it is open to honourable people to come to different conclusions in the case, it is entirely outwith the bounds of the Ministry's own provisions to have declared the pilots responsible.

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry, but that is absolutely not right. The board of inquiry was instructed properly, according to the rules governing such inquiries that prevailed at the time, and the board pursued the matter perfectly properly. My hon. Friend seems to imply that it should be possible to reopen any decision or judgment at which a board of inquiry has arrived simply because, later, others take a different view. That cannot be right and it cannot be the right way in which to deal with such matters.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): The Prime Minister finds time to see a very strange group of people, from Bernie Ecclestone to Liam Gallagher. How come he could not find time to receive an all-party delegation from both Houses, including several Privy Councillors, who were seriously concerned that there may have been a breach of natural justice in this case?

Mr. Hoon: That is obviously a matter for the Prime Minister. However, if the hon. Gentleman had phrased his question in a slightly more sensible way, I might have been willing to give him a rather more serious response. Nevertheless, the reality is that the Prime Minister is engaged in this matter, and that he has answered a number of questions on this issue in the course of his responsibilities. I am sure that if the hon. Gentleman seeks to catch the Speaker's eye on a future occasion when the Prime Minister is answering questions, he will be able to raise that issue with him.

Iraq

8. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): What discussions he has had with his Armenian counterparts as to developments in Iraq. [132992]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I remain in regular contact with the United States Government on a range of issues, including Iraq. I exchanged views most recently with Mr. Cohen, the Secretary for Defence, in the margins of NATO informal ministerials, in Birmingham, on 10 October.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): The question is on Armenian counterparts.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: That was a printers' error, Mr. Speaker.

My right hon. Friend will know that the Iraqi sanctions are being flouted on a massive scale, particularly in the case of oil, and that that information is well known to the Americans. What action is being taken to enforce the sanctions?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend knows that determined efforts are made by the international community to enforce sanctions. Those efforts are not as effective as we

would like them to be. However, certainly, we continue to see real value in the enforcement of sanctions and we play our part in that process.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Given the differences between British policy and French policy on Iraq, how will the Government's objectives be helped by the new European Union military arrangements, particularly if, as reported in yesterday's *The Sunday Telegraph*, the director general of the military staff is to be French?

Mr. Hoon: The military arrangements that are the headline goal are not anticipated to be used in the context of enforcing the no-fly zones in Iraq, which is what British forces with their American counterparts are engaged in. I am, therefore, not sure that the premise of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's question is at all relevant. Nevertheless, it gives him an opportunity to air once again the anti-European phobia that too many Opposition Members seem to be suffering from.

Sierra Leone

9. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): How many British troops are deployed in Sierra Leone. [132993]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): Our announcement on 10 October indicated a small increase in the total number of troops deployed in Sierra Leone. The number will vary depending on the training task under way, but it is likely to be slightly over 400.

We also made it clear that, under our memorandum with the United Nations, we are ready to deploy a rapid reaction force in support of United Nations peacekeeping operations. As an early demonstration of the seriousness of that commitment, we are taking advantage of the completion of an exercise in the Mediterranean to divert an amphibious ready group comprising elements of our joint rapid reaction forces off Sierra Leone for a limited period during November. The group will include HMS Fearless, HMS Ocean, three Royal Fleet Auxiliaries and 42 Commando embarked. While in the area the group will be able to practise procedures and to conduct a detailed reconnaissance, both of which will significantly reduce the time needed to deploy should the rapid reaction force be required in future.

Mr. Thomas: I welcome my right hon. Friend's answer. Can he assure the House that, while clearly doing everything possible to support the United Nations peacekeeping force, we are not going to see mission creep or find ourselves in the situation of British forces taking the fight direct to the rebels?

Mr. Hoon: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. The primary purpose of British forces going to Sierra Leone is not only to train the forces of the Government of Sierra Leone, but to demonstrate that the current deployment is there for training purposes. The 400 whom I mentioned earlier are there to assist the Government of Sierra Leone in developing forces of their own that can be used to take on the rebels. The deployment there of the amphibious ready group is part of a demonstration of our commitment to the United Nations, pursuant to a memorandum that we signed with the UN in 1999.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): I support the training mission, which is essential for the long-term stability of Sierra Leone. It is also right that the United Kingdom should provide additional forces to assist the United Nations effort. Without them the success of the training mission cannot be guaranteed. However, instead of a separate command, would it not make much more sense to place the additional British forces under the United Nations command? The withdrawal of the Indian and the Jordanian troops is generally accepted as weakening the UN effort. How will we persuade other countries to contribute to the UN effort if we are not willing to contribute to it ourselves?

Mr. Hoon: I do not accept that analysis of the problem. The training that we are conducting is quite separate from the United Nations mission in Sierra Leone. We have offered extra headquarters staff to UNAMSIL to give it some assistance in deploying its forces as well as provided substantial assistance to the Government of Sierra Leone. We believe that the best way of assisting that Government is to make sure that they have forces on which they can call to resist the rebel forces in Sierra Leone.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): We clearly have obligations to a Commonwealth ally that is seeking to achieve democracy. We also have obligations to the United Nations which, as the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) said, is potentially facing a crisis of confidence with Jordanian and Indian forces leaving as the fighting season begins. Is it the Government's clear view that our reinforcements are in Sierra Leone only for confidence building and to tidy matters up in the short term and that there will be no move—substantial or otherwise—from a training to an active intervention role?

Mr. Hoon: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. May I make it clear that we announced on 10 October that the training will continue certainly until April of next year? We recognise the importance of providing a substantial body of trained troops to the Government of Sierra Leone. The early training teams have been very successful and have provided soldiers whom the Government of Sierra Leone can use. We also wish to extend the training so that, as well as providing trained individuals, we ensure that the Government of Sierra Leone can call on trained groups. That means more than simply providing individual soldiers with weapons, uniforms and boots, but providing them with the equipment that will be needed if they are—as we hope they will—to take the fight to the rebels.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Earlier Government policy hinged on an effective UN force being in place with the right numbers to be able to keep the peace. However, that force has proved ineffective. As the Secretary of State knows, it will not take the action that is necessary. Now, with the departure of the Indians and the Jordanians, it is beginning to look even more ineffective than it was when British forces

were deployed earlier this year to support it. That leaves us with a vacuum that, as Labour Members have already said, may well suck us deeper into the conflict.

Will the Secretary of State answer a question that will help to give us clarity? What conditions in Sierra Leone must prevail in the mind of the Government for British troops to be withdrawn?

Mr. Hoon: May I deal with the premise behind the hon. Gentleman's question? There is no suggestion at the moment that the UN force is not effective. It has preserved peace in Sierra Leone and there is no sign that the rebels have taken any new ground. Indeed, it is clearly central to our policy that that force should be effective.

We have been able to help—as I said, we have provided headquarters staff to guide the UN force—and we believe that that is an effective way forward. However, it is important that the Government of Sierra Leone should have effective forces on which they can call. The early training teams have done a tremendous job in making soldiers available to that Government. We believe that they need more soldiers, but those soldiers should be trained not only as individuals, but as formed fighting forces. That work is likely to start fairly shortly. Ultimately, we want the democratically elected Government of Sierra Leone to control their own territory.

Army Operations

11. **Mr. Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter): What is the current percentage of the Army *(a)* committed to, *(b)* preparing for and *(c)* recovering from operations. [132995]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): Some 22 per cent. of the trained Army is committed to operations. This figure includes units preparing for, deployed on and recovering from operations. Of these, 15 per cent. of the trained Army is currently deployed on operations.

There has been a significant reduction in commitment levels over the past year, particularly since the height of the Kosovo campaign in July 1999, when the commitment level reached a peak of 44 per cent. The current level of commitment is below that inherited from the previous Administration.

Mr. Bradshaw: I am pleased to hear it. However, what would the impact be if the United States were to withdraw its forces from Kosovo and Bosnia, as George Bush junior has threatened to do in the unhappy event that he becomes President?

Mr. Spellar: Certainly, any new Administration—whichever candidate wins in that election—will obviously wish to review their foreign and defence policy and have discussions with their allies in that regard. NATO has been ensuring that there are adequate forces in both Bosnia and Kosovo so that we can maintain a stable situation in those societies, as demonstrated by the very welcome elections in Kosovo over the weekend.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Given the high strike rate of operations at the present time, which I regard as unavoidable, will the Minister assure the House that, even though the Ministry of Defence cut back on the training programme last year, there will be no such cutback in the high-intensity battle training for the year coming and the year after that?

Mr. Spellar: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about the level of operations and his understanding of the requirement for those. He will also understand that we try, wherever possible, to avoid any cuts in significant training. Last year, on balance, although there were one or two highly publicised events, very little training suffered cutbacks.

Of course, we will be acquiring greater flexibility with the increase announced in the comprehensive spending review—the first planned increase, I remind the House, since the cold war.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): In the context of single people, in particular, who are preparing for and recovering from operations, what progress has been made in improving accommodation for them in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Spellar: The answer is, significant but not yet sufficient. The Secretary of State, the Under-Secretary, who is responsible for the accommodation programme, and I are working with the Ministry to improve that programme. We take the point that, over a number of years, housing has been used as the balancing item, which has had a significant effect on deteriorating conditions. Public focus has often been on married quarters, but having visited a number of those quarters, we are very aware of the inadequate provision for single living accommodation and we intend to do something about it.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Government have to deal with those who are preparing for operations. Will the Minister accept that 1,000 drivers being trained to help bust any sort of strike may well be included among those, as they are being prepared and are ready to be deployed on an operation? As and when they are deployed on that operation, will those military drivers be under the command of the Home Office or the Ministry of Defence?

Mr. Spellar: First, let me be quite clear. I am not aware of a proposal for a strike anywhere in terms of national supplies. I am aware of threats to blockade, disrupt, barricade—in other words, of threats potentially to conduct illegal action. In the event that such action took place—I stress that it would not be a strike—and that the civil authorities and the civilian organisations were unable to undertake action to provide those supplies, there could be a request to the military to provide that equipment and also, therefore, that service.

In answer to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), there is no requirement for any legal authority to undertake training. The legal authority comes on deployment of forces. Therefore, the forces would be under the command of the armed forces. The request would come from the civil authorities and—to clear up any misapprehension that there may have been in the press—the maintenance of law and order is the responsibility of the civil authorities.

I find it quite extraordinary that there is no Conservative comment deploring proposals to disrupt national supplies as a way of changing public policy. Other Members of the House and the public will have noted that.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Now that the Minister has had his rant, perhaps he would answer the question exactly and specifically. Why would the Government, in the form of the Ministry of Defence, be training 1,000 drivers? Who requested that that be done? If those drivers are deployed, will they be under the command of the Home Office and, thus, will there be a state of emergency? Who asked for it?

Mr. Spellar: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman does not understand how government works. There is collective responsibility, with a lead from the Home Departments. In the event of a breakdown in vital supplies to the nation, the Home Departments could make a request to the military authorities to provide military aid. Therefore, we have to make contingency arrangements so that we could respond to such a request if it were made. Clearly, the hon. Gentleman does not understand the rules, regulations and laws relating to military aid for civil authorities, but that is probably because Conservative Members have been busy supporting those who were barricading the refineries rather than defending law and order.

Rogue Governments

12. **Mr. Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): What recent assessment he has made of the military threat to the United Kingdom from states with rogue Governments. [132996]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): Our assessment is that there is no significant immediate military threat to the United Kingdom. We continue, however, to monitor the development of military threats very closely.

Mr. Flynn: That is a great relief. If there is no threat to us, what will be our attitude to the phantom threat that is encouraging the United States to introduce a national missile defence system that will entail the upgrading of the radar station at Fylingdales in this country, which we are told is in conflict with the anti-ballistic missile treaty? If George Bush wins the election in America, is not it true that there will be an attempt to introduce that very dangerous national missile system not to secure world peace, but to secure fat contracts for the American arms industry?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has asked that sort of question before, but I should have thought that he would have taken account of the measured approach adopted by President Clinton in stating that he would defer any decision on the deployment of national missile defence. In those circumstances, no request has been made of the United Kingdom and, therefore, much of what he asks me to comment on is mere speculation. However, I can tell him that President Clinton took careful account of the views of the United States' allies, including the United Kingdom.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that the Foreign Office is opposed to ballistic missile defence, what pressure has the Secretary of State received from his right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to curtail his Department's involvement in the United Kingdom readiness and risk assessment programme?

Mr. Hoon: Again, Opposition Members need to understand the doctrine of collective Cabinet responsibility, because the Government speak with a single voice on those matters. I have set out the Government's view precisely. We have had discussions with our US allies. We were delighted that, in announcing his decision to defer any decision in the United States, President Clinton said that he had taken account of those views. We are most grateful.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), the Defence Secretary said that President Clinton had taken account of the views put forward by allied Governments, including the United Kingdom. Can he tell us exactly what those views were? Will he place those opinions in the Library so that they can be made public? Will he say that, in the event that either future President Gore or future President Bush requests us to endorse national missile defence, with all its dangers and illegalities, the British Government will simply say no?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend asks me to speculate on a decision that has not even been taken in the United States and which the US President has recently said does not need to be taken. In those circumstances, he is simply making a request for speculation. A number of issues have to be taken into account. I am delighted that the US President was prepared to take into account the views of allies and said as much.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Given that rogue Governments may well use information warfare techniques to pose a military threat to the United Kingdom, and that our information warfare defences will almost certainly include commercially available software, what action does the Secretary of State plan to take following the recent hacking into Microsoft's most secure systems?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Lady is right to point out that there are, in the modern world, ways in which Governments can be attacked other than by conventional military means. We are aware, across Government, of such threats, and we take every step to develop defences against such potential attacks. As the Microsoft incident shows, there are some ingenious and clever people who are prepared to put their talents at the disposal of the unscrupulous, and we must guard against them, too.

Bosnia

13. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): How many British troops are deployed in Bosnia. [132997]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): Currently, we have about 2,300 troops deployed in Bosnia, serving with SFOR. We are on target for a commitment of about 2,000 troops by the end of the year. About 4,000 troops are deployed in Kosovo, 500 of whom were deployed for the election period. My right

hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence plans to visit the Balkans region before the end of this year and intends to call on troops serving in KFOR and SFOR.

Mrs. Williams: How long does my hon. Friend believe that British troops will remain in Bosnia?

Mr. Spellar: Quite simply, that will depend on developments in Bosnia. To some extent, that will be influenced by the favourable developments in Serbia and the departure of Milosevic—a departure hastened by the strong action of allied forces last year and our strong commitment against him since then.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Is the Minister studying the recent election results in both Serbia and Kosovo? What change have they made to the Government's thinking about the troops being kept there? Will he reassure the House that the commitment is not unlimited? The troops have been in Bosnia for about eight years and it looks as though they could remain for a very long time to come.

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman would agree that the overthrow of Milosevic changes the situation. It is a favourable development on which we must build, but it would be premature to contemplate timetables. No one should underestimate the change in the region, which has been matched or even precipitated by the change in Croatia, where again a hard-line regime was defeated by a more progressive one that clearly wants to be part of Europe. We intend to build on those very favourable developments. It might be premature to set a timetable, but the changes begin to offer us some light.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): Will my hon. Friend ensure that the House's appreciation for the work of our forces in Bosnia is communicated to them? What message does he have for the new Government in Belgrade concerning the restoration of normal relations with Bosnia, to allow a de-escalation of the military presence in the Balkans?

Mr. Spellar: We intend to reopen the embassy there and to appoint a defence attaché. Discussions are taking place with ourselves and other European countries. We should recognise, however, that the first priority of the new regime in Belgrade will be the reconstruction of the country. The new Government will have to focus on that, but we aim to work with them and help them in that process.

Far East Prisoners of War

18. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): When he will announce the outcome of his review of the case for ex gratia payments to former far east prisoners of war. [133002]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister told the House last Wednesday, the Government's review of the case for awarding additional, ex gratia, compensation to former UK service personnel who were prisoners of war in the far east is still in progress, but we expect a decision to be announced very shortly.

Mr. Heath: Does the Secretary of State appreciate the strong support throughout the House for a group of people who have experienced privations that are unimaginable to most of us? It is much to be regretted that the Government have been sending mixed signals on the issue over the past few months. Can he assure us now that the question will be resolved, not within months or even weeks, but within days?

Mr. Hoon: I do understand the issue. My father served in India and in Burma during the second world war. I grew up in no doubt of the conditions in which many of our armed forces were held, of the appalling circumstances and, moreover, of the fact that many of those people carried that legacy throughout their lives; some continue to do so. Therefore, I am aware of the circumstances. I assure the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members that the matter will be resolved as quickly as possible.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, since the Prime Minister replied to my question last Wednesday, there has been greater optimism among the people affected that a settlement will very soon be reached? I hope that it will be reached very shortly. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is the Japanese who should pay compensation, and that their refusal to do so has led to the position where the British Government are likely to do so? Should we not remember that some 25 per cent. of prisoners never returned because of the horrifying conditions that they had to endure, dying as prisoners of the Japanese?

Mr. Hoon: Some compensation was paid under the 1951 peace treaty. I accept that, understandably, those affected regard that compensation as inadequate, which is precisely why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister acknowledged the other day that this nation, the United Kingdom, owes those people a particular debt of honour. It is that debt of honour that we are reviewing. I hope that the optimism that my hon. Friend mentions is vindicated.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Does the Secretary of State accept that the far east prisoners of war were, as I have pointed out to the House previously, victims of war crimes? Will he give a commitment that any payments to them will be not means-related, but absolute ex gratia payments either to the far east prisoners of war themselves, or to their widows if they have since died?

Mr. Hoon: I am well aware of the implications of any decision that the Government take. All I can do is assure the hon. Gentleman that those factors are taken into account as part of the review that is yet to conclude.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there are only 7,500 former far east POWs left and that, in the next few years, that figure is likely to

drop substantially? Can we do quickly what the Tories failed to do for 18 years: get an announcement out of the way and get the money to those men before it is too late?

Mr. Hoon: I have indicated my appreciation and understanding of the problem. All I can say to my hon. Friend is that we are proceeding with the review as quickly as we possibly can.

European Security and Defence Initiative

20. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): What contribution the United Kingdom is making towards meeting the headline goals of the European security and defence initiative. [133004]

21. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent discussions he has had with his European Union counterparts about the European security and defence initiative; and if he will make a statement. [133005]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I discussed European security and defence issues with my EU counterparts at the EU Defence Ministers informal meeting on 22 September in Paris, and with all NATO allies at the informal meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in Birmingham on 10 October.

We discussed progress on elaborating the requirements of the Helsinki headline goal and member states' possible contributions to a pool of capabilities that could be drawn on in the event of a crisis. Contributions from member states, including the UK, will be formally identified at a capability commitment conference to be held on 20–21 November.

Mr. Wilkinson: As the capability conference is imminent, can the Secretary of State not come to the House later this week and say clearly which units will be earmarked from the British armed forces to fulfil the role under the ESDI? Is it not a very large role to deploy an Army corps for up to a year, sustained by 350 combat aircraft and no less than 80 naval vessels? Where are the extra resources coming from? Is there not a risk that it will damage NATO without any corresponding increase in capability, unless the money and resources are forthcoming?

Mr. Hoon: There is—the hon. Gentleman was no doubt alluding to it—a defence debate on Wednesday and Thursday this week. Clearly, it will be possible during that debate to discuss those matters in more detail, but I doubt that we would be in a position by Wednesday or Thursday to indicate to the House precisely what initial contribution we are offering as part of the capability conference. However, I make it clear to him and, indeed, to other hon. Members that what is proposed in relation to the headline goal is not a standing force. It is not a force that will permanently be waiting for some Petersberg crisis to be called into action. They are commitments of capability in exactly the same way as NATO allies contribute to NATO and to the United Nations where appropriate. We are seeking to persuade other European Union member states to have available the kind of rapid reaction forces that, as a result of the strategic defence review in particular, we can make available for international operations.

Miss McIntosh: May I congratulate the Defence Secretary on answering more questions than usual in his own right? Will he give the House an assurance this afternoon that the Americans will not see the ESDI as a threat to European defence and that our European partners will meet the commitments that we are expecting of them in this regard?

Mr. Hoon: I was assuming that the hon. Lady would disagree with the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) on this subject. Nevertheless, I can give her a clear assurance, as was given by Bill Cohen, the United States Defence Secretary, most recently at Birmingham that the United States Administration strongly support the development of European capabilities and want to see them improved. Indeed, had the hon. Lady studied the history of the US and NATO, she would know full well that for a long time the US has called for a more effective European contribution to NATO because, in strengthening Europe's contribution to NATO, we will be strengthening NATO itself.

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): This is my first public opportunity to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on assuming the Chair. I am very pleased.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the increasingly fanatical Euro-sceptic statements from the Opposition are seriously undermining confidence in, and support for, the A400M and Eurofighter, and that a proper criticism should be made of the equipment's capability and not of the fact that it is built by a European consortium?

Mr. Hoon: I am always lost in admiration for my hon. Friend's ability to draw in subjects that are not obvious from the Order Paper, but I certainly have some sympathy with his views. I wonder, in the unlikely event of the Opposition ever returning to government, which particular partners they would associate with in future. Clearly, they want to leave the European Union. They criticise every aspect of any decision taken in the context of the European Union and they reject the views and advice of the current United States Administration because they do not want the US to be content with a European development, so I wonder where their isolationist tendency is leading.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Perhaps the Secretary of State will get away from polemics and revert to the facts. Does he accept that any European defence initiative for a rapid response force must have the lift potential to be got to wherever the problems are as quickly as possible? That lift potential does not exist in Europe at the moment. Is it to be expected that we will rely entirely on the Americans to provide that lift potential, or how quickly does he envisage France, Germany and ourselves will be able to provide it?

Mr. Hoon: Perhaps I would not be tempted to polemics if the right hon. Gentleman, in asking such questions, were more likely to say how much he approved of the Government's position on airlifts. Had he started by asking how it is that, over many years, the Government

whom he supported failed to invest in the airlift that is required to carry out international missions and said how well the present Government had done in making the necessary investment, I might have had a bit more sympathy with him. Nevertheless, I can assure him that by agreeing to lease four C17s, which will be in service next year with the RAF, and by committing to buy 25 A400Ms—a new European transport aircraft—we will put in the necessary investment for our armed forces to have the heavy lift required to get them rapidly into theatres where they are needed. I think that I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, although I would be greatly appreciative if he were a little less grudging in his comments.

Cotswold Families Centre

22. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): If he will visit the Cotswold families centre in Corsham to discuss its future. [133006]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I should like to take this opportunity to commend the service provided by the services Cotswold centre on behalf of service families. As the hon. Gentleman is aware, the future of the centre is under review and we hope to make a decision about its future in the first half of next year.

Mr. Gray: Is there not a curious irony that the outstanding service provided at the centre for the victims of family breakdown—as well as education services for the local battered wives refuge and other services entirely for less-privileged people—which was preserved by the Conservative Government for 18 years, should now be under review by the Labour Government, who claim to be committed to persons of that kind? The Minister has been reviewing the centre for some three and a half years already. Will he at the very least agree to complete the review as soon as he can? Will he come and visit the centre with me—I shall welcome him there any day he cares to come—so that I can show him personally the excellent work that is carried out there?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman has raised this matter with me before, and I understand his concern. However, I receive a considerable number of requests to visit establishments around the country. This is one that we are considering, but I cannot give him a guarantee.

One of the reasons why the review is taking a while is the excellent work undertaken at the centre, which no one wants to underestimate. However, the centre is underused. Its average monthly occupation rate is between 60 and 65 per cent. Some 93 per cent. of the families staying at the centre are either in transit between family quarters or are on a break. Only 5 per cent. of families staying at the centre are experiencing welfare problems. There is a need to evaluate—as we must do right across defence activities—whether such a service can be provided more cost-effectively elsewhere. Those considerations are being weighed up. Once a conclusion has been arrived at, we shall give it the fullest publicity.

Nuclear Defence Industry (Scotland)

28. **Mr. Bill Tynan** (Hamilton, South): If he will make a statement on the numbers employed in the nuclear defence industry in Scotland. [133012]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): The total number of personnel employed directly by the Ministry of Defence in establishments in Scotland that undertake nuclear-related activity is 3,974. In addition, we employ private contractors. Also, the figure does not include service personnel ported at the Clyde naval base.

Mr. Tynan: Is my hon. Friend aware of the situation in Scotland, where the policies of the Scottish National party as regards the nuclear industry are causing tremendous concern to the work force? Will he ensure that he publicises the threat to the nuclear defence industry in Scotland? Will he seek to reassure the people working in the industry?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend and I have met members of the work force, who are enormously professional and have an enormous pride in the skills that they employ, as well as in the contribution that they make to Britain's defences. The House will not be surprised that Scottish National party Members have chosen not to turn up today; there is nothing unusual in that. However, their views on this subject are at direct variance with the views of the great majority of people in this country and are very much at variance with the interests of the work force on the Clyde at Coulport and Faslane, the many other workers who depend on those establishments for their employment and the suppliers to the defence industry. I need no incitement from my hon. Friend to undertake to give the widest possible publicity to the difficulties that Scottish National party policy would cause not only for the people at Faslane and Coulport, but for the people of Scotland and the industry generally. *[Interruption.]* I cannot quite hear what the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) is saying with regard to this matter; I am sure that it is instructive.

Speaker's Statement

3.30 pm

Mr. Speaker: I have a statement to make. During the debate on defence procurement last Thursday, several points of order were raised with the Chair. Two issues in particular arose. The first issue was whether it was acceptable for a Minister to make policy announcements during a debate rather than through a statement to the House. That is a long-established practice, and announcements of the sort that were made last Thursday have been made in this way by previous Governments on a regular basis. I quite understand the anxieties that were expressed on Thursday about the practice, but it may equally be convenient for the House for announcements to be made during a debate. What is certain is that no rule or convention of the House has been broken, though I would expect Ministers to give careful thought to the matter when considering making announcements in this way.

The second issue is potentially more serious. An allegation was made that the substance of the Minister's announcement had appeared in the media before the House was informed. I must make it clear that if Ministers were to release information to the press before the House was informed of major policy developments I would regard that as an unacceptable discourtesy to the House. If that occurred, I would expect the Minister concerned to apologise to the House. With regard to last Thursday's announcement, it appears that some broadly accurate advance information reached the media. The Secretary of State for Defence has assured me that he is confident that the information did not come from his Department. I accept that assurance. Nevertheless, I expect Ministers to take measures to ensure that other authorities, who are privy to confidential information, protect it until the House has been informed. I hope that the Secretary of State will pursue the matter.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I wholeheartedly welcome the points that you made, especially the second part of the statement, which dealt with information. In answer to Question 9, the Secretary of State appeared to make a statement about new policy on the deployment of troops to Sierra Leone. I wonder whether it would have been more appropriate for the right hon. Gentleman to have taken Question 9 at 3.30 pm.

Mr. Speaker: That is up to the Secretary of State.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. During last Thursday's debate, at column 448 of *Hansard*, I said that, if the Secretary of State had made the information available to the BBC website, as the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) suggested, he should apologise to the House. Even if not he, but someone from his office, were responsible for providing that information, would it be your ruling that he should apologise to the House?

Mr. Speaker: I have made a clear statement to the House. The hon. Gentleman should read it in *Hansard*.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Although I welcome the guidance that you have given the House, could you provide further clarification? You will understand that the difference between a statement and incorporating information in a debate is that, when a specific statement is announced in advance, hon. Members have an opportunity to come to the House and question the Minister appropriately. Under the overall umbrella of a debate, hon. Members may not be aware that such information will be made available.

At column 414 of the record of last Thursday's proceedings, the Secretary of State said:

> Let me complete the statement, and I shall certainly give way in due course.—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 414.]

It would appear that the Secretary of State came to the House, and gave what amounted to a statement in a debate. However, hon. Members had not been apprised of that, and therefore had no opportunity to decide whether they should be present to take part. You will understand that distinction, Mr. Speaker. May I invite you to go further than you have already gone in making the distinction?

Mr. Speaker: I have made a statement, and I believe that the Secretary of State has got the message.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: I hope that hon. Members are not seeking an expansion on my statement.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Having taken part in the proceedings last Thursday, and welcoming your ruling today, I accept, of course, that the regulations of the House were not breached. However, although the letter of our regulations may not have been breached, the spirit most certainly was. If there is a statement, right hon. and hon. Members have an opportunity to prepare and you, Mr. Speaker, in presiding over our proceedings, can ensure that there is sufficient time for questioning and that there is a proper balance of participation by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House. If the Secretary of State is incorporating what is, in effect, a statement into his speech in a debate, the intervention of hon. Members is purely at the Secretary of State's discretion. That is not appropriate.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman will note that my statement referred to the Minister giving careful consideration to these matters.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Further to the second part of your statement, Mr. Speaker, which you said was the more important one in that it covered the more important issue, does not an unsatisfactory situation arise in the House? It appears that there was a leak on Thursday to the media of material that was clearly conceived and drafted in the Ministry of Defence. The Secretary of State says that he personally was not responsible, but presumably that means that either one of his officials was or there was a leak from the Ministry of Defence, which in the nature of things would be a matter of considerable concern, to some other organisation, which then itself passed the information on to the media.

If we do not have the apology which you said would be required had the Minister been directly responsible, Mr. Speaker, do we not need at least an inquiry to ascertain how it was that information came from the Minister or from his office into the media? Without such an inquiry, surely the public will never be aware of what exactly occurred on Thursday. As you have said, we face a bad situation.

Mr. Speaker: I said in my statement that I hoped that the Minister would pursue the matter, and I am sure that he will.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Is it a point of order?

Mr. Skinner: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I have listened to the points of order with increasing incredulity. Having been in this place during the 18 years when the Tories were in government, I had the impression about three times a week that policy was being announced when I listened to it on "Today" and it was repeated on "Newsnight". If we were lucky a statement would be made on the following day, or no statement would be made.

There is another area that should be examined. We live in a time when the Liberals are consulted about many things. How do we know that it is not that lot on the Liberal Benches who are doing these things?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Is there to be a point of order every day, Mr. Bercow?

Mr. Bercow: I assure you that it is intended to be a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am most grateful to you for your clarification in response to my point of order last Thursday about the conduct of the Secretary of State for Defence. He said on that occasion that no words—this is important, and I refer to column 424—for which he was responsible appeared upon the BBC website. It is only right to point out that the right hon. Gentleman sidled up to me earlier this afternoon to vouchsafe to me his innocence.

Will you confirm, Mr. Speaker, that it is not good enough for a Minister to go to the Member who has complained to protest his innocence? It is necessary for him openly to apologise to the House for the leak on behalf of one of his officials, which has obviously taken place.

Mr. Speaker: The Secretary of State will have heard the hon. Gentleman.

Orders of the Day

Race Relations (Amendment) Bill *[Lords]*

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 3

ASSISTING CASES UNDER THE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT 1998 INVOLVING COMPLAINT OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

'After section 66(1) of the Race Relations Act 1976 (Assistance by Commission) there is inserted—

"(1A) Subsection (1) shall also apply to proceedings or prospective proceedings under the Human Rights Act 1998 in which the complaint or claim includes or is proposed to include discrimination on racial grounds by a public authority.

(1B) For the purposes of subsection (1A) a public authority shall have the same meaning as in section 19B of this Act.".'.— *[Mr. Simon Hughes.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

3.38 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) apologises for not being present, Mr. Speaker. All roads from Taunton are cut off.

In the Race Relations Act 1976, a power is granted for the Commission for Racial Equality to provide assistance through advice and support during legal proceedings. It is set out clearly. The provisions relate to proceedings or prospective proceedings under the Act. An individual who is a claimant or might be a claimant, or complainant, can apply to the commission for help. The commission then considers the matter—I have had constituency experience of such cases—and if it thinks that there is an issue of principle or if it thinks that it would be unreasonable to expect the applicant to deal with the case unaided because it is difficult or because of the relationship between the applicant and the body complained against, or for other special reasons, it, the commission, can give help. The new clause represents an attempt to extend that power in light of the passage of the Human Rights Act 1998, which came into force at the beginning of this month.

I want to say again publicly what Ministers have heard me say elsewhere. I and the Liberal Democrats greatly welcome the Human Rights Act, and we welcome its passage into law in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland where it was passed last year. I and my colleagues join the Minister and the Secretary of State in welcoming that.

As a result of that Act coming into law, someone may want to bring an action under the Human Rights Act only or under a combination of the Human Rights Act and the Race Relations Act 1976—or the Act as amended if the Bill becomes law, which we very much hope it will. Under the new clause, we propose that the commission's power to give help should be extended

to proceedings or prospective proceedings under the Human Rights Act 1998

when there is a claim or prospective claim that includes

discrimination on racial grounds by a public authority.

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

It is not a matter central to the Bill, which deals with discrimination and positive duties in law. It is an ancillary proposal, and would bring the Bill into line with existing legislation.

There are obvious reasons why we want to put this proposal to the House now, and I hope that the Minister will give a positive response. I am mindful of the fact that we debated these matters in Committee. That seems a long time ago—it was the other side of a long recess for the Commons—when the Human Rights Act had not yet come into law, so things have now moved on.

The first reason is that, as the Minister will understand—it does not need anyone to persuade him—a person might bring an action that at one and the same time could be an action under the Race Relations Act and the Human Rights Act. It would be nonsense if two separate actions in law were started: indeed, the courts would be unhappy about that if they were on the same issues. It would be logical to join the complaints together.

Ministers may give the technical answer that advice to people would be covered under the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill or the original 1976 Act, but the stronger case may be on discrimination under the Human Rights Act and the straightforward implementation of the convention through English law. The Commission for Racial Equality or others may say that that is the best way to proceed. A case may proceed on the basis of racial discrimination, but it would be better, and a person would be more likely to succeed, if the applicant took action under the Human Rights Act.

That is the first reason why we believe that the commission's power should be extended. It uses that power carefully and considerately. I have had experience of the commission helping people to take cases to court, and of it turning down people who have asked for help when it has considered that their case was not justified.

Secondly, our case may be stronger now than it was before the summer because the Minister said before the recess that the Government were moving towards the creation of the Human Rights Committee of Parliament. That commitment for a Committee of both Houses was welcomed. There are one or two other such Committees. It would be the new body to consider human rights matters in the light of the implementation of the 1998 Act. I am aware—I do not think that it is confidential information—that some progress has been made in the House of Lords on agreement on the structure of the Committee, but the proposal has not yet come before the Commons. I am also aware that there have been discussions on that matter between Whips Offices and party managers. The proposal has not been lost, but it has not happened. Even if it did, things would take a while to get going—as they always do—so there is a benefit in acting now that the Bill has been introduced, to give the Committee power, even if Ministers did not think that necessary before the summer.

3.45 pm

I wish to put on the record one further important thing so that I do not take up the time of the House when we return to the matter later. My colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who is Liberal Democrat Chief Whip and our shadow Leader of the House, have made representations to Ministers and their colleagues, and their view is generally supported by members of the Conservative Front Bench, although Conservative Members must clarify that themselves. It is an important principle that, once the Committee is set up, its Chairman, like that of the Public Accounts Committee, should, for the time being, be an Opposition Member of the House of Commons. The reasons for that are pretty obvious. It is a long-standing practice that the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee is a senior Opposition Member of Parliament, as it is thought important that it is not a Government Member who looks after public accounts and that scrutiny should come from elsewhere. The PAC is an all-party Committee that is representative of the balance of the House, but the Chair is taken by an Opposition Member who, at the moment, is the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis).

The same should apply to the Human Rights Committee, which will be a Committee of both Houses. Quite properly, the Government have the power both to introduce legislation and certify whether legislation complies with the Human Rights Act. The Secretary of State certifies on the front of the Bill that it is compliant with that Act. Therefore, the scrutiny of such matters in both the Commons and the Lords should be undertaken by a senior Opposition Member, whether a member of the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrat party or, indeed, any other Opposition party. I also state publicly our belief that, for obvious democratic reasons, that role should be undertaken by a Member of the House of Commons, not the House of Lords. Of course, there are eminent people in the House of Lords, and I pay tribute to those who have made the Bill much better during its passage through the House. Ministers have been equally courteous, but it would be invidious to list everyone who has contributed. However, Lord Lester of Herne Hill, who has pre-eminent national expertise in such matters, has contributed greatly and has worked hard, both publicly and privately, to get the Bill into the best possible shape.

Although negotiations on the Human Rights Committee are being pursued, the Committee is not in existence, so the power to set it up should be introduced now. I suspect that the Minister will respond to our debate in a second, and I hope that he will tell us that the Government will act urgently to introduce a motion to set up the Committee, which was supposed to have been established by 2 October. That meant that it should have been set up before we broke up for the summer, given that we were did not return until after that date. It is now after 2 October, Parliament is back and the Human Rights Act is in force, so there is no excuse. I therefore hope that, before this week ends, a motion to set up the Committee will be laid before the House and that, thereafter, a motion for the membership of the Committee, including its chairmanship, will be tabled.

Lastly, when the Human Rights Committee is up and running and sets up a human rights commission which, it is envisaged, will look after these matters—although that may not necessarily be the case—will the House consider whether that commission should be different from the Commission for Racial Equality? I accept that that new commission will not have the experience of the CRE. People have different views about the CRE's individual acts and expressions, but no one doubts its authoritative

and greatly experienced position in giving advice in such cases. It helps meritorious cases and puts off cases without merit. People with the CRE's experience who can give such advice are to be valued.

I hope that Ministers can be positive about the new clause. I am conscious that the Bill began in the Lords and that its Report stage may be the last occasion on which we may deal with these matters. That is unusual, as most Bills start in the Commons and therefore come back to us. If Ministers do not concede the new clause, the power of the Lords to do anything about it is limited, given that they can amend only what we amend here. I therefore expect more than warm words if I am to be persuaded not to press the new clause to a Division. I hope that the Minister can be helpful.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I shall speak briefly to new clause 3. As I understand the proposal tabled by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and his party, it would allow the Commission for Racial Equality to intervene and to advise in cases arising under the Human Rights Act 1998, where the complaint involved some discrimination on racial grounds by a public authority.

The illustration that the hon. Gentleman gave the House to demonstrate the need for such a measure involved a complaint that might arise both under the Race Relations Act 1976 as amended by the Bill, and on human rights grounds. In such a case, it would be stupid for two parallel law suits to proceed.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point. I am no lawyer, but I should have thought that in such a case, where the courts joined the two complaints together, and the case involved an allegation that the 1976 Act had been breached, there would indeed be a role for the commission under existing legislation, which would make the new clause unnecessary.

I went on to consider what sort of case might involve an allegation of racial discrimination by a public authority, but would not come within the remit of either the 1976 Act or the Bill. I could envisage a situation in which a citizen chose to use the Human Rights Act 1998 to try to overturn one of the specific exemptions included in the Bill or in the 1976 Act. The hon. Gentleman's new clause, if agreed to, would give the CRE the right to spend time and money on seeking, via the Human Rights Act, to overturn those aspects of race relations legislation that had been agreed by Parliament.

For that reason, I am somewhat sceptical about the proposal, although the Minister or the hon. Gentleman may be able to reassure me. I take the view that if Parliament has chosen to include in legislation specific exemptions from general statutory obligations, changes to such arrangements should be sought through Parliament via the full legislative process, not through the back-door route of a challenge under the Human Rights Act.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): May I take this opportunity to warmly welcome you to your present seat, Mr. Speaker, and express the hope that you will long be warming it?

Members of the Standing Committee that considered the Bill are aware of the Government's thinking on the issue. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) set out our broad view. We welcome the support given by the Liberal Democrats and all other parties to the Human Rights Act 1998 when it was passed.

The new clause, like one tabled in Committee, would enable the CRE to provide assistance in relation to alleged breaches of the 1998 Act that include allegations of racial discrimination—not just claims where the principal issue was racial discrimination, but any claim that included any aspect of racial discrimination in the context of the Human Rights Act.

The Government explained in Committee that we had given a commitment to consider a request from the Disability Rights Commission for it to have the power to assist individuals in proceedings under the Human Rights Act 1998, in light of the outcome of deliberations of the planned Human Rights Committee. Rather than considering those issues piecemeal, which would involve separately examining the Commission for Racial Equality, the DRC and the Equal Opportunities Commission, our view is that it would be better to consider in an holistic manner whether all the commissions should have the right to take such action. We feel that it is important to take such a broad-based approach—the situation should be examined in a wide context involving all three commissions, and we should give our view in due course. We also hope to take cognisance of the approach suggested by the Joint Committee, once it is established.

A further difficulty is that the new clause is not clear on how it relates to the rest of section 66 of the Race Relations Act 1976, into which it would be inserted. For example, subsections (3) and (4) of that section describe how the commission should proceed on receipt of an application for assistance under the 1976 Act, but the new clause does not appear to make a similar provision in respect of claims for assistance under the Human Rights Act 1998. That technical deficiency would leave an unacceptable gap in that important area.

However, I do not want to inform the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey that we reject his suggestion. There are arguments for his position, and we want to examine them in a broader context.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the Human Rights Committee, whose draft standing orders are under active consideration. We hope that it will start its work in the near future, when its membership has been decided. He knows very well that the usual channels decide such matters. Decisions about the Chairperson of the Committee and other matters will no doubt be made in the usual way, and I do not intend to venture further into them. I gather that the hon. Gentleman has his own route in that regard, and he doubtless knows how to make use of it.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Although I note his comments on the envisaged time scale, I want to press the Minister not on that last matter, but on the first point that he made. What time scale do the Government envisage for the completion of their review about whether the power could be granted to all commissions, irrespective of the new Committee's timetable?

Mr. O'Brien: To some extent, we are dependent on the new Committee, whose views we want to hear and which must have an opportunity to discuss the matter.

[Mr. O'Brien]

I hope that it can do so quickly. The Government will examine the Committee's views and take a broad-based approach.

To some extent, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, it is important to decide on our approach in the near future, rather than in the longer term. If we took a view on the Disability Rights Commission, for example, it would be possible to make progress fairly quickly because of the way in which the legislation is framed. However, it might take longer to do so in respect of the EOC and the CRE because we might have to frame a legislative opportunity in order to take such action.

In response to the point that was raised by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), the cases that will be brought by the CRE will, primarily, involve the Race Relations Act 1976, but they may raise subsidiary points involving the Human Rights Act 1998. No doubt, such points will be raised during those proceedings. In that context, I should be very surprised if a lawyer said to a court, "I shall argue the case in relation to the Race Relations Act but not in relation to the Human Rights Act." The Government need to take a view on that matter sooner rather than later—I envisage the period involved to be months rather than years, but I do not want to be pressed further on that because it will be necessary to discuss with ministerial colleagues the appropriate speed at which we should make an announcement.

4 pm

Mr. Hughes: That was an entirely reasonable answer, for which I am grateful.

May I ask one last question about the timetable? When the public records of the last few months and this month are released to the public—as no doubt they soon will be, under freedom of information legislation—can we take it that they will show the Home Office to be actively pressing Government colleagues to set up the Human Rights Committee this very month?

Mr. O'Brien: No doubt the proceedings of the Joint Committee will be of great interest to all parliamentarians, and they will be able to find out about those proceedings in the way in which parliamentarians normally ascertain such matters. Certainly we want progress, and I am sure that the Liberal Democrats—in so far as they might be the source of any difficulties in the reaching of agreement between the usual channels—will seek not to be the source of such problems.

As I have said, we intend to look at all the commissions in an holistic way. In view of that, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will feel able to withdraw the motion.

Mr. Hughes: I am sure that you, Mr. Speaker, those on the Conservative Front Bench and the Government will be delighted to hear that—so generous are we at the beginning of the new term, and so trusting of the Minister's good faith on the occasion of his and my first appearance since our return—I am happy to make a once-only offer. I am grateful for the Minister's assurances, and I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

ANNUAL REPORT ON LEVEL OF DAMAGES AWARDED

'The Secretary of State shall lay before each House of Parliament an annual report on the level of damages awarded in cases brought by virtue of the amendments made to the 1976 Act by this Act.'.—*[Mr. Lidington.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Lidington: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

In Committee we had a thorough debate about compensation, in which I expressed fears that have been expressed in various quarters outside the House about the growth of a culture of litigation and compensation mirroring some of the worst examples that we have seen across the Atlantic. However, I welcome the opportunity to draw attention in this afternoon's short debate to the continuing view of Conservative Members that it is important for the Government, and all agencies that will be connected with the enforcement of the Bill once it is law, to have regard to the impact of compensation awards on the public authorities to which the Bill will apply.

Under the Bill, public authorities could be at risk from two directions. First, there would be the risk of litigation in regard to alleged discrimination on grounds of race. Secondly, following the introduction of a positive duty for scheduled public authorities to promote good race relations, there would be the possibility of judicial review of the actions of those authorities, to challenge whether they had exercised their statutory duty in a correct manner.

We should all be concerned about the risk of vexatious litigation, or of compensation awards—or, indeed, out-of-court settlements—to avoid oppressive legal costs that could lead to real difficulties for some public authorities. On 13 April, the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, said in Committee—this can be found at column 48 of the report of the proceedings—that the current level of awards in non-employment cases was about £1,000, and that the level of out-of-court settlements in advance of proceedings was about £6,000 per case.

Those figures sound relatively small, but, given that later this afternoon we are to debate the inclusion in schedule 2 of schools and their governing bodies, we must bear in mind that, to a small primary school and its governing body, a sum of £6,000, or even £1,000, is significant. We must carefully consider potential litigation and compensation awards that might face small public authorities, such as schools, which are governed by volunteers, not by professional executives. Even if the Ministers do not concede a formal annual report, I hope that they will agree to keep the matter under close scrutiny and be prepared to return to Parliament to amend the legislation, if the scale of compensation that is required to be paid out under the Bill proves to be oppressive on our public institutions.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I have only three brief points. First, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) has made a perfectly reasonable point.

Secondly, new clause 5, which was not selected for debate—I make no criticism of the selection—goes wider than new clause 4, by addressing a point that is often

made during the passage of new legislation, which is that there should be an opportunity for a report to be made to Parliament on the working of the legislation in general. I would welcome such a report as one way of ensuring parliamentary accountability.

My third point relates broadly to damages and emerges from the argument made by the hon. Gentleman. The inconsistency of damages is a national issue: constituents have pointed out to me that if a relative or dependant dies as a result of criminal injury and if one chooses to make a claim under the criminal injuries compensation scheme, one is entitled to a sum of—if memory serves—no more than £10,000, and possibly as little as £5,000.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): It is £3,750.

Mr. Hughes: It is certainly an extremely small sum. The problem is that, at the same time, we read in our newspapers about damages of hundreds of thousands of pounds that are awarded in the civil courts and elsewhere for comments that have caused offence or for constructive dismissal.

The matter may be one for the Cabinet Office or the joined-up government people—whoever they are—because a cross-departmental approach is needed to ensure some degree of fairness in the award of damages. I know that the courts are given guidelines, but damages can be awarded by other agencies. I simply want to draw attention to public unhappiness about the increasing gap between awards made in compensation for serious matters and the huge damages awarded for matters that, in the scheme of things, are relatively minor.

There is a general public policy interest to be addressed and I should be grateful if Ministers gave it their consideration. I hope that someone will write to me and the hon. Member for Aylesbury about how Government Departments intend to approach the matter.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have listened to the comments made about the need to reflect on the nature of payments made to victims of racial discrimination and others. I agree that we do not want to enter into a compensation culture, but missing from the arguments made so far—uncharacteristically so, in the case of the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington)—has been the expression of any concern about victims. Should victims not be compensated if they have been discriminated against? Of course they should; they should have the right to some type of remedy.

It is quite right that we do not want to get into a situation in which vexatious litigants, who are a pest in the legal system, are able to bring frivolous cases before the courts. To some extent, we have to rely on our judges to be robust in dealing with vexatious litigants, and on the Legal Aid Board to ensure that people do not receive legal aid if they are seen to be merely vexatious. I think that most hon. Members are aware of people, in their constituencies or elsewhere, who have sought to abuse entry to the courts.

We need, however, to get the balance right. There is every reason for Parliament to be concerned about getting the balance right between the victim's right to receive some form of compensation and the need to ensure that money from the public purse is spent properly.

Mechanisms already exist to provide annually the type of information dealt with in new clause 4. The new clause would lead to duplication, bureaucracy and costs, particularly if police had to provide extensive information on the reasons why particular types of damages were allocated by a court in a particular case, which may involve issues in addition to racial discrimination. I am reluctant unnecessarily to impose such a burden on police, who are already required to do much of that work under section 95 reports.

Section 46 of the Race Relations Act 1976 already requires the Commission for Racial Equality to produce an annual report that includes a general survey of developments in the issues that fall within the scope of the commission's functions. The commission's reports usually contain details of awards of damages in cases that it represents. Additionally, those reports are laid before the House; indeed, I have just approved the laying of the most recent report.

As explained in the Bill's explanatory notes, in cases represented by the commission in 1997–98, awards averaged approximately £1,000, settlements averaged approximately £2,000, and pre-litigation settlements settled by commission officials averaged approximately £6,000. We would expect the commission to continue to report on damages awarded in cases that it represents, including cases brought under new provisions outlawing race discrimination under the Bill.

Although the Bill does not provide financial remedies in respect of the positive duty in clause 2 to promote race equality, again we would expect the commission's annual report to cover any enforcement action that it has taken in the year in question under the new provisions. The Government therefore feel that the current reporting requirements in section 46 of the 1976 Act already provide for what is necessary and appropriate.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not alarming—far more alarming than the issue of compensation payments to which the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) referred—that public bodies continue to be found to be discriminating, and, therefore, that there continue to be genuine cases of discrimination? Surely the whole emphasis of the Bill should be that, in this day and age, race discrimination and gender discrimination—which we are not debating today—simply should not occur in public bodies.

Mr. O'Brien: Although, by and large, our public authorities do not discriminate, there have been cases in which they have been found to have done so. That is regrettable. The Bill's underlying basis, as my hon. Friend rightly said, is the attempt to end unacceptable discrimination in our public authorities, and to ensure that we have public authorities that treat people with the respect that they deserve and to which they are entitled.

Mr. Hughes: The Minister mentioned the commission's annual report, which many hon. Members are familiar with and many of us receive. Will it list all the awards of damages or only a summary of those awards? If it contains only a summary, will information be provided to enable people to locate information on the full awards?

4.15 pm

Mr. O'Brien: As I understand it, there is a summary in the report. It does not list all the awards, because I suspect that some of them are the subject of legal confidentiality. Some may be out-of-court settlements that contain certain clauses in the contracts. I do not know the extent to which the Commission for Racial Equality provides information on the awards, but if the hon. Gentleman wishes me to find out, I can certainly do so. However, I have always found the CRE to be very open in providing information and background briefings on individual and general issues to Members of Parliament.

Mr. Lidington: I was somewhat disappointed that the Minister underrated the deterrent impact on public authorities and private organisations of the costs of litigation. One of the most unsatisfactory aspects of several recent highly publicised cases has been that some public bodies have made public statements that they would agree to an out-of-court settlement involving the payments of many thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money, not because they have conceded that they have discriminated—they continue to assert that they have not—but because they could not afford the time and the money that would have to be spent on contesting litigation if matters were to proceed to law. That is not satisfactory for anyone.

I do not dissent from the view of the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) that public authorities in particular should set the lead and resist racial discrimination. As far as they can, they should ensure that all their conduct and practices are designed to prevent such discrimination taking place. However, it is also true that different judgments in the court cases involving the definition of indirect discrimination that have taken place since 1976 have determined the scope of such discrimination in different ways. Therefore, it is possible for an organisation—or an individual—to believe that it has acted in a way that complies with the law only to find that, after legal argument, the judgment is that certain practices are tantamount to indirect discrimination under the Race Relations Act 1976 and need to be changed. There is some uncertainty in the current statute.

I was grateful to the Minister for reminding us that the Commission for Racial Equality has a duty to publish a report each year and that that report includes at least some information on the level of compensation awards. I hope that it is a matter to which the chairman of the commission and his team will continue to give their attention. As a result of this debate and those that took place in Committee, I hope that Ministers will also continue to keep the matter under review. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1

DISCRIMINATION BY POLICE AND OTHER PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 2, in page 1, line 9, leave out from "a" to end of line 17 on page 2 and insert—

'public authority in carrying out any functions of the authority to do any act which constitutes discrimination.

(2) In this section "public authority"—

(a) includes any person certain of whose functions are functions of a public nature; but

(b) does not include any person mentioned in subsection (3).

(3) The persons mentioned in this subsection are—

(a) either House of Parliament;

(b) a person exercising functions in connection with proceedings in Parliament;

(c) the Security Service;

(d) the Secret Intelligence Service;

(e) the Government Communications Headquarters; and

(f) any unit or part of a unit of any of the naval, military or air forces of the Crown which is for the time being required by the Secretary of State to assist the Government Communications Headquarters in carrying out its functions.

(4) In relation to a particular act, a person is not a public authority by virtue only of subsection (2)(a) if the nature of the act is private.

(5) This section is subject to sections 19BA to 19E.

(6) Nothing in this section makes unlawful any act of discrimination which—

(a) is made unlawful by virtue of any other provision of this Act; or

(b) would be so made but for any provision made by or under this Act.

Exceptions or further exceptions from section 19B for judicial and legislative acts etc

19BA.—(1) Section 19B does not apply to—

(a) any judicial act (whether done by a court, tribunal or other person); or

(b) any act done on the instructions, or on behalf, of a person acting in a judicial capacity.

(2) Section 19B does not apply to any act of, or relating to, making, confirming or approving any enactment or Order in Council or any instrument made by a Minister of the Crown under an enactment.

(3) Section 19B does not apply to any act of, or relating to, making or approving arrangements, or imposing requirements or conditions, of a kind falling within section 41.

(4) Section 19B does not apply to any act of, or relating to, imposing a requirement, or giving an express authorisation, of a kind mentioned in section 19C(3) in relation to the carrying out of immigration and nationality functions.

(5) In this section—

"immigration and nationality functions" has the meaning given in section 19C; and

"Minister of the Crown" includes the National Assembly for Wales and a member of the Scottish Executive.'.

Mr. Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 4, 21, 22 and 38 to 40.

Mr. O'Brien: There have been several discussions during the Bill's passage through this House and the other place about the approach that should be taken to the definition of public authorities for the purposes of section 19B of the Race Relations Act 1976. The choice is essentially between a listing approach and a generic definition as used in the Human Rights Act 1998. The Government have throughout listened to the arguments, both inside and outside the House, particularly those about the need to avoid small gaps arising in coverage, which was a perceived risk with the listing approach that was originally proposed.

In response to those concerns, we made a commitment in Committee to introduce amendments that would provide for the adoption of a generic definition for the purposes of defining public authorities. These amendments meet that commitment. They delete the provisions for a listing approach for the purposes of section 19B of the 1976 Act and provide instead for a definition based on section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998. As flagged up in Committee, the generic definition has been adjusted to allow for a very limited number of specific exemptions—namely, for the Houses of Parliament, the legislative functions of the Scottish Ministers, the National Assembly for Wales and United Kingdom Ministers, the intelligence agencies and judicial acts.

The Government stress that functions have not been exempted other than where there are good reasons for doing so. Our approach is governed by the principle that the Bill should not fetter the legislative functions of Westminster, the Scottish Parliament or the National Assembly for Wales. Ministers will remain subject to parliamentary scrutiny but, like others involved in the legislative process, they must retain the ability to make legislation that discriminates, where that is justified—for example, to implement immigration legislation that requires discrimination on grounds of nationality, or social security or education legislation that discriminates on grounds of residence. That is consistent with the existing provisions of the 1976 Act, which provide that acts done with statutory authority are not unlawful.

To include the intelligence and security agencies in the Bill would have required special clauses to safeguard against claimants misusing certain provisions to undermine the operational effectiveness of those agencies. The necessary safeguards would, in practice, have the same effect as excluding the agencies from the Bill. The Government therefore believe that it is better to continue to make the exemption clear, as we did with the listing approach, rather than having it obscured by special clauses which might be a matter of judicial interpretation. We want the position of the security and intelligence agencies to be very clear.

Nor do the Government think it appropriate that decisions of courts and tribunals should be challenged by way of proceedings in the county or sheriff court under section 19B. Allowing civil action against judges would interfere with the concept of judicial immunity, and the Government would not wish the Bill to cut across that. Immunity is an aspect of the principle of an independent judiciary. The independence of the judiciary is a key feature of the British constitution and runs parallel with immunity.

Mr. David Lammy (Tottenham): This debate about the nature of public authority is clearly more than simply a semantic debate about definition. Many private companies and organisations carry out their business under a clear public remit. Many of those profit-making companies have habitually neglected to promote, employ and support ethnic minority people in the workplace. My constituents will welcome the amendment, but I hope that we are moving towards a situation in which racial equality is about the economic as well as the social context of Britain in the 21st century. The amendment, as it applies to private organisations, is very important in that regard.

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend is right. We should ensure that private sector organisations which undertake public functions should know that they will have obligations under the race relations legislation, and that the Bill will cover them in so far as they undertake the public functions for which they are contracted. Indeed, Group 4 has today taken the trouble to say publicly that it is delighted that the Government have decided to use the Human Rights Act definition of a public authority in the Bill. Group 4 says that it firmly believes that there should be a level playing field between the public and private sectors in all social policy matters. I welcome Group 4's announcement; it is entirely along the lines that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that he wants to go.

Let me return to judicial immunity, which is an important part of our constitution. Judicial immunity does not mean that a person lacks a remedy against racial discrimination or any other form of bias, but the proper avenue for a challenge in the courts is by an appeal, not by making a fresh claim against a judge. The fair and efficient functioning of the justice system requires us to avoid satellite litigation and the reopening of cases.

I must flag up another important issue. It will be for the courts to decide whether a public body is a public authority for the purposes of the legislation and whether a particular function is a public function. That bears on the point that I made earlier about Group 4 and private companies and other private bodies that undertake public functions. The Government are grateful to those who have contributed to the way in which the legislation will be interpreted, especially to private companies such as Group 4, which have said that they will be happy to be brought within the legislation.

Having listened to all the contributions, the Government are also grateful to Members of both Houses of Parliament who have given their views on how we should take forward that definition and on whether we should use either the list or the generic approach. We have shown that we have listened with great care to the debate. There was a genuine argument about the various public functions that might have slipped through the net if we had used the listing approach and, therefore, we think that an approach based on the Human Rights Act 1998 is the best that can be delivered. In due course, the courts will make judgments on cases under the 1998 Act. That will define matters of public function and public authority. I hope that that will soon clarify the matters covered by the 1998 Act and the Bill, and that hon. Members will agree to the amendment.

Mr. Lidington: I welcome the Government's decision to move from a listing approach to a generic approach. As the Minister said in his opening speech, both sides of the House were involved in a constructive debate on the issue. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and his noble Friends can take pride in the way they helped to promote the idea. As a result, we shall have a better approach than that under the Bill as originally drafted.

I want to ask the Minister some questions to tease out in more detail exactly which persons and what activities will be exempt under amendment No. 2. First, I shall deal

[Mr. Lidington]

with Parliament. I accept completely the Minister's argument that the legislative function of both Houses of Parliament should remain free and that they should not have to look over their shoulders at the Bill, but I am intrigued that the exemption will also apply to

a person exercising functions in connection with proceedings in Parliament.

That strikes me as a phrase that could be said to apply very widely—to House of Commons administration and staff, as well as Officers of the House and perhaps even *Hansard* reporters. Will the Minister flesh out a little more which people the Government intend the phrase to cover?

4.30 pm

The Bill will now exclude the security and intelligence services and GCHQ. I support those exclusions, but if those organisations are to be excluded, why not the National Criminal Intelligence Service, the National Crime Squad and others who work closely with the security and intelligence services and may well be party to operational knowledge that the Government rightly want to keep secret? Those police organisations are engaged in very sensitive and secret work against organised crime, terrorism and drug trafficking. Do they not need the same protection that the Government want to afford to the security and intelligence services?

A comparable point could be made about members of the armed forces on active service. We discussed that in Committee, and it was debated in the House of Lords. Should not the exception that the Government are applying to the security and intelligence services and to members of the armed forces assisting GCHQ also apply to members of the special forces, and especially those on active service? There are units whose operations have traditionally been regarded as a matter for secrecy by Governments of both political colours.

The Minister said that the courts would have to rule in due course on what is a public authority. In Committee, I referred to the position of the Churches and I make no apology for doing so again. As an obvious example of my point, civil registrars, as public officials, will be subject to the provisions in the Bill in carrying out their duties involving the preparation of couples and the conduct of the marriage ceremony, but will ministers of the Church of England or the Church of Scotland be similarly subject? Surely those ministers carry out a public function when they, too, conduct marriages. Have the Government engaged in any consultation with the Churches about the impact that the Bill might have on them, especially in the light of the controversy that blew up on the matter during proceedings on the Human Rights Act 1998?

I have no problem with the Government's proposal that judicial authorities—judges, magistrates and tribunals, in their judicial capacity—should be exempt from the normal operations of the Bill, but does that exemption also apply to Ministers of the Crown when they act in a quasi-judicial capacity, for example when they place themselves in the shoes of a judge in setting the tariff for a life sentence prisoner? I should be grateful for answers to those questions.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Like other colleagues, I am grateful for the progress that we have made on this matter, and for the fact that, when we came up with what seemed to be the best way forward in terms of the definition of "public authority", the debate was listened to.

First, it strikes me that that produces a shorter Bill, and that must be a good thing. I will comment on the way in which the Bill could be further shortened when we come to another debate.

Secondly, it is a good idea for the definition of "public authority" in one piece of legislation passed by a Parliament to be the same as the definition of "public authority" in another piece of legislation passed by that Parliament, albeit a year or so later. That seems to be a good idea in terms of political and parliamentary practice, and I welcome it. I am grateful for the work done by colleagues in the Lords and for the debate that we had in Committee.

I have a supplementary question, which picks up on one of the points made by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) about definition. It concerns the point about employees or functionaries of the Church or other religious organisations carrying out a public function.

I raise that not only because I have responsibility for these matters on the Liberal Democrat Benches but because the matter has been raised in the context of prospective European legislation. Last week, the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) was given leave to introduce a ten-minute Bill so that we may at least take the debate forward and discover what exactly is allowed. The hon. Gentleman's Bill would exempt religious organisations and although it was not on all fours with this proposal, it raised the same set of issues.

What we are discussing now is clearly a narrower issue because it is about people acting for religious organisations who, in that context, are also acting as a public authority. The conduct of marriages is a good example. People in this country can have their marriage conducted entirely in a religious ceremony, and do not, as in other countries, have to have a separate civil ceremony. I should be grateful for elaboration on that matter and on whether Ministers have been advised how—if at all—the measure ties in with prospective European legislation on such matters.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The welcome from both hon. Gentlemen speaking for the Opposition parties is music to my ears. The Government are pleased that we have been able to take a constructive and listening approach during the debate, and grateful for the contributions from all parts of the House on these issues.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) asked about the areas covered in respect of Parliament. The existing Act already covers employment functions and certain unlawful acts—they are set out in part IV—and areas that may be subject to parliamentary privilege. It covers the provision of goods, facilities and services.

The Government do not wish to fetter the legislative functions of Westminster, the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly in extending the Act. In the case of the United Kingdom Parliament, there are issues of parliamentary privilege. Interference with the privileges of Parliament should obviously be avoided. The first report of the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege has looked at the need for, and recommended, clarification of the definition of parliamentary privilege in relation to each House's privilege to administer its own internal affairs.

It would be pre-emptive and impractical to try to resolve the issues involved for the purposes of the Bill before critical decisions have been made in relation to the wider issue of privilege. We are not therefore proposing to extend any further the application of the Bill to the UK Parliament. That is consistent with the approach taken in the Human Rights Act 1998.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the issue of exercising functions in connection with proceedings in Parliament. We envisage that it is an area directly involved in the preparation of legislation. It is not an exclusion that would deal with areas not directly involved in preparing legislation and the proceedings of this place. That is the position as far as I understand it. The hon. Gentleman raised the matter and I raised it with officials. The definition is quite tightly drawn.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I was a little concerned that the measure might look a little wide, but considering Pepper *v.* Hart and being aware of all that, I am indicating that we intend it to be construed in a way that has direct applicability to legislation and to the proceedings in this Parliament relating to debates.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury also asked me why the National Criminal Intelligence Service and the National Crime Squad are not included. Following the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, our intention was to bring the police within the realm of the Race Relations Act. As NCIS and the National Crime Squad are akin to police forces and their director-generals have responsibilities which are equivalent to those of a chief constable, the Government believe that, in order to meet the commitment made in response to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry report to apply race relations legislation to police forces, NCIS and NCS must be covered. The Government do not envisage that the problems associated with including the intelligence and security agencies would be replicated for NCIS and NCS, and indeed we have no reasons to have any concerns that this might cause problems in terms of the operational effectiveness—or anything else—of those two organisations, which are well aware of their responsibilities to ensure that they do not racially discriminate.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about special forces. I have had no requests from the Ministry of Defence to exclude them, so I assume that there is a degree of happiness with the current situation. However, just to be sure that there is no difficulty, I shall take up the hon. Gentleman's point with Ministers at the MOD. These days, the Army in particular has a proactive view on race equality and many parts of our armed forces have a good and improving record in that respect.

The hon. Members for Aylesbury and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) asked me about a more complex issue—whether the legislation would cover ministers of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland in relation to their role as registrars. They will be covered when they carry out a public function but not when they carry out private functions as ministers of the Church. I envisage that the public function of signing the various documents which relate to their legal and public duties will be covered. However, decisions about who should have a service conducted in their Church, for example, will be an issue for the Church. The same would apply to other Church-related decisions. However, in recent decades Churches have been particularly conscious of the need to ensure that they regard race equality as particularly important and I have no real concern that the Churches will find themselves subject to any substantial litigation in relation to the Bill. The Churches are well aware of their responsibilities on race equality and I suspect that most of them will welcome the inclusion in the Bill of at least their public functions.

Finally, the hon. Member for Aylesbury asked me whether the legislation covered Government Ministers exercising a judicial function. The answer is yes. An immigration function, for example, would be covered. That is not a good illustration as immigration matters are excluded, but any other quasi-judicial decision would be covered by the exemption. However, we want to make sure that Ministers are aware that they have moral as well as legal responsibilities and that they must not discriminate unless there is a good public interest reason for doing so. Later amendments relate to circumstances in which discrimination may be proper and lawful and may well have the support of the House, but normally that would not be the case.

I hope that I have dealt with most of the issues, and I am pleased with the warm welcome that the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have given to the amendment.

Amendment agreed to.

4.45 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 2, leave out from beginning of line 18 to end of line 31 on page 3.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 54, in page 2, line 38, after "(5)", insert—

'in connection with the granting or refusal of—

(a) pre-entry clearance to enter the United Kingdom;

(b) leave to enter the United Kingdom;

(c) leave to remain in the United Kingdom;

(d) a condition or conditions of leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom; or

(e) citizenship of the United Kingdom.'.

Government amendments Nos. 3, 35 to 37, 41, 42, 44 and 45.

Mr. Cohen: This is a good Bill which implements the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry and tackles the real problems of direct and indirect institutional racism. However, my amendment deletes the exemption of immigration and asylum matters from the institutional racism provisions.

I can put the case by putting on record an article in journal No. 56 of the Campaign against Racism and Fascism. It is by Frances Webber, a leading immigration lawyer. She puts the matter succinctly, albeit a little pejoratively towards the Home Secretary. The article, which is called "The last frontier: immigration controls and racism", asks:

Why does a minister who wants to be remembered for his anti-racism keep on giving aid and comfort to racists? In the Race Relations (Amendment) Bill currently going through Parliament, Home Secretary Jack Straw is once again trying to face both ways at once. On the one hand, the Act allows immigrants and asylum-seekers to appeal against immigration decisions and to obtain damages from a county court, if such decisions have discriminated on grounds of race or colour. On the other hand,

immigration officers will be authorised to discriminate on the grounds of "nationality, ethnic or national origin" in carrying out their functions under the Immigration and Nationality Acts.

In the Lords, Lord Bassam of Brighton sought to justify the provision by talking about the need to stop "scams" operated by Chinese nationals masquerading as Malaysian or Singaporean Chinese which, he claimed, made it acceptable for immigration officers to check every Chinese-looking person.

The question puzzling us lawyers who act for immigrants and asylum-seekers is this: how on earth are we going to prove unlawful race discrimination on the part of an immigration officer, if it is not unlawful for an immigration officer to discriminate against someone on the grounds of their "perceived ethnic origin"? It is ironic that a law brought in to counter institutional racism ends up—so far as immigration is concerned at least—by rationalising and further institutionalising it.

Notwithstanding the comments regarding the Home Secretary, there is a fundamental point there concerning the complete exemption of the immigration and asylum service. I tabled the amendment to get a response from the Minister on why this exists, when the thrust of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry and the Bill is to tackle institutional racism wherever it occurs, including in the public sector. I do not see why immigration should have that total exemption.

Proposed section 19C states that it will not be

unlawful to discriminate against another person on grounds of nationality or ethnic or national origins . . .

where the act is by a Minister acting personally or an immigration official acting in accordance with an authorisation by the Minister, or with respect to a particular class of case authorised by statute or statutory instrument. If this House has delegated the power to a Minister, I see that he could exercise that power. However, I am concerned as to how he will delegate power—presumably down to a civil servant, or even to junior civil servants. I would like the operation of the system to be spelt out. Will the exemption also apply to a junior civil servant in the immigration and nationality directorate acting in the name of the relevant Minister or civil servant?

How will the Minister be held accountable? Will ministerial responsibility extend to the actions of the junior civil servants in the immigration and nationality directorate who act in his name under the proposed legislation, or will he be able to palm things off on the civil service, as happened with the BSE scandal? That is a serious point about ministerial power and its possible extension to civil servants.

In the context of junior immigration officers who may exercise power and to whom the exemption may apply, there have been cases in the past of such officers being sympathisers and supporters of openly racist parties such as the National Front or the British Movement. Although I have not heard of a case for many years, there have been such cases in the past. I presume that disciplinary measures are in place. I ask the Minister to confirm that. How will they operate against an officer who is openly racist if it is lawful under the Bill for him to discriminate? Those questions need answering.

I understand that there is a delay in determining and authorising the classes of cases in respect of which discrimination will be lawful. Perhaps the provision will not be effected until next April or later because the immigration and nationality directorate needs more time to determine those classes of cases. If that is so, will the classes be spelt out to Parliament, perhaps with an opportunity for a discussion on them? They do not appear in the Bill. Can they be changed arbitrarily? Can new classes be added without anyone other than civil servants knowing?

If the Government are going to persist with the exemption for the immigration service, what activities will be authorised as lawful racial discrimination? A broad, blanket authorisation is not right. I am worried about the classes of cases to which the clause refers. Racial discrimination could take place on the basis of scare campaigns. For example, an argument was made for trying to ban all Kenyan Asians and Ugandan Asians as a class, regardless of the merits of the cases of individuals, who were facing perhaps torture or death in the countries that they were leaving. The same could apply currently to the Roma.

The provision could lead to a susceptibility to scaremongering, and to racial discrimination in immigration and asylum policy—through banning whole categories of people—becoming legal under the Bill. Another recent example is the Kosovans—perhaps they could all have been banned under the Bill. I shall be interested in the way in which the Minister deals with that concern.

Today, I received a letter from Mr. Richard Jarman, the parliamentary officer of the Commission for Racial Equality. It stated:

In a meeting I had with the Refugee Council and the Immigration Law Practitioners Association, the one activity where discrimination occurs that is of real concern is the detention of asylum seekers on arrival (when they have committed no offence in the UK whatsoever). Currently certain nationalities and people of Roma ethnicity are nearly always detained. The CRE, Refugee Council, ILPA all say that detention of asylum seekers should not be done on the basis of nationality or ethnic or national origin but on the basis of the particular circumstances of each individual asylum seeker.

Clearly that will not happen given the way in which the law is framed. There is a potential blanket provision to discriminate. There should not be a blanket authorisation of discrimination when dealing with asylum seekers on arrival. That is clearly different from detention prior to deportation, which often happens after a person has breached his conditions of entry. Blanket authorisation on arrival has a possible institutional racist content.

The role of the monitor is set out in proposed section 19D. I know that he will submit an annual report to Parliament, but what can he say? How can he refer to any institutional racism in the immigration and nationality service or even on the part of a Minister? Will that be exempt under the law? Could such racism be deemed legal in immigration matters? What power will the monitor have? Will he have the power, for example, to see all the papers and files in a case? Can a Minister or civil servant deny access to them?

The monitor might be toothless, rather like the prison ombudsman, who was denied access to papers and files by the previous Government. Will he be able to investigate every case where a charge of racism is brought, or will he not even be notified of cases where racism has been alleged? Will he be able to require revised consideration by the immigration and nationality service, perhaps of a Minister, and a possible new decision where, in his opinion, racism has occurred in the service?

If the monitor is not to be able to do any of these things, what can he do? Without any of the powers to which I have referred, he will be toothless and not worth even an annual report to Parliament.

These are important matters. The Government have set off on the path of total exemption for the immigration and nationality service, and it is not the right approach. It might be a matter of balance but total exemption is not the answer. If my amendment and those of Liberal Democrats are not accepted, the matter should be kept under review. Perhaps an amendment might be introduced later. I await my hon. Friend's answers with interest.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I welcome the debate. Effectively, the amendments set out three options. The matter was the subject of considerable debate in Committee.

We face the danger of bad drafting. The Government are seeking to amend the Race Relations Act 1976 by inserting a new clause that states what is unlawful and by introducing a supplementary new clause, proposed section 19C, which sets out exceptions to what is unlawful. Later, there are tabled the exceptions to the exceptions to what is unlawful. I am not, and have never wished to be, a parliamentary draftsman, but I hope that we can do a bit better. The Bill has to go to the other place when we have dealt with it, so perhaps someone can consider whether we can make it easier for people to use.

5 pm

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) has tabled the most widely drawn amendment. It would remove new section 19C, which is to be inserted into the 1976 Act. The Minister's proposal in Government amendment No. 3, which he will speak to later, qualifies the list of Acts with immigration and nationality functions that come within the exemption and are, therefore, outside the protection of the legislation, by stating that the list will not apply to certain activities. It does not say what activities it covers, but refers to another part of the legislation. It excludes

sections 28A to 28K of the Immigration Act 1971 so far as they relate to offences under Part III of that Act.

Those are in fact policing functions in relation to the activities of the immigration and nationality directorate. Again, it might be helpful to make that clear.

Our amendment seeks to do what the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead hinted might be a way forward. It would allow the law to apply in general terms: people could not discriminate in their work in the immigration and nationality directorate unless those activities were on the legislated list. We believe that those activities should certainly and logically be included in the list. In relation to immigration, there are clearly activities in which discrimination on the basis of nationality, for example, is justifiable.

Our amendment sets out five exemption categories. The first is

in connection with the granting or refusal of . . . pre-entry clearance to enter the United Kingdom.

It is entirely logical to allow people to be discriminated against if the view is taken that, for example, the entitlement of someone from a Commonwealth country is different from that of someone from a European Union country or someone who is from neither. The second category relates to leave to enter, which is the permission granted when people arrive here as opposed to the permission granted before they leave to come here. The third category concerns permission to stay here—leave to remain. The fourth is in connection with conditions that are imposed on a leave to enter or remain. The fifth relates to citizenship, because we discriminate against people on the basis of where they come from and their relationship with this country. We propose that those should be exempted categories. I hope that, at worst, we get confirmation from the Minister that, in light of our debate in Committee, the Government will move in that direction.

I do not pretend to have a perfect understanding or knowledge of this subject, but we would argue that those are the most logical categories for exemption and, to take the view of the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead, that no others appear to need that protection. I stand to be corrected by the Minister if I am wrong. He might say that I have forgotten a category and that a sixth should be added. However, our case is that the categories should be specified in the Bill. If we do not do that, we will give a "relevant person", who is defined as

a Minister of the Crown acting personally; or—

the hon. Gentleman alluded to this—

any other person acting in accordance with relevant authorisation,

who could be quite a long way down the hierarchy of responsibility, the ability to make decisions in particular cases. The Bill as it stands leaves it to Ministers to define at a later date the particular class of case. We are effectively providing for secondary legislation, although it might not technically be called that—again, I stand to be corrected. Decisions are to be made later by Ministers when we have given general permission under the Act. Our argument is not unfamiliar. The provision gives Ministers huge discretion and does not even provide the benefit of allowing us to know what the category will be, even though Ministers have been much better on that matter recently than they have in the past. Sometimes when a Bill is introduced, we see a draft of regulations under it before we approve it. We know what the Government have in mind and can be clear about what is expected. However, this Bill does not make provision for a schedule or document setting out what the authorisations are likely to cover.

In addition, as the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead pointed out, we do not have a date by which such a decision will be made. I accept that, if we are going to go down that road, the Bill has to be introduced before any power under it can be exercised. However, the time gap could last several months. This debate is a bit like our earlier debate on the definition of public authority. It is better to specify clearly the categories under the Bill, but I accept that Ministers may argue that one category, or perhaps two categories, have been forgotten. I accept that categories have to be clear.

This issue is controversial in the world outside Parliament, so I shall explain when we accept that it is right to discriminate and allow that power, and when it is wrong. In Committee, we said that we would limit the scope for permitted discrimination on the grounds of nationality or ethnic or national origins to functions of the immigration and nationality directorate, when nationality is a legitimate ground for difference in treatment, or when ethnic or national origin could be a ground for different treatment.

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

That would not interfere with rules or procedures requiring visas, entry permits or work permits for people of some, but not all, non-UK nationalities. That is quite understandable, as every country works on that basis, and the issue would, rightly, remain separate from anti-discrimination legislation. To take a slightly controversial example, we would not stop the Home Office taking into account the ethnicity of Romanies or Roma people from eastern Europe when deciding their asylum applications, as it is a relevant factor that, clearly, is not to be excluded. However, we would prohibit discrimination on the grounds simply of nationality or ethnicity in circumstances such as those described by the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead. It would therefore be impossible to say that one was going to detain all asylum seekers from Kosovo, but not those from Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro or elsewhere.

It is important to make that distinction as the decision about asylum seekers and their treatment consists of two elements. The first is how asylum seekers are treated when they come into this country and whether they are free—I shall return to that in a second—and the second is how their application is determined. In law, it is clear that every asylum application must be treated on an individual basis. The Government accept that case, which is unarguable under the United Nations convention on refugees. It is also clear that there should be no presumption about detention for any particular category, which should be decided on an individual basis.

There is a dispute on this issue, not so much between Labour and Liberal Democrat Members, but between both our parties and the Conservative party. We believe that it is against international law for asylum seekers to be detained when they come to this country simply on the basis that they are asylum seekers. We accept that it is proper to detain them if they have a criminal record or if intelligence leads the authorities to believe that they could break the rules, escape or be unwilling to be subject to authority. However, my understanding is that such discrimination is illegal in the areas covered by the European convention, and possibly also in the European Union.

I tested that during my one official foreign visit—all Members of Parliament are authorised to make one two-day European Union visit during each year. I went to Finland. My visit coincided with a certain football match, at which I considered it important to watch crowd control measures, having dealt with the Football (Disorder) Bill in Parliament. The police in this country—the National Criminal Intelligence Service and others—and the Finnish police were extremely helpful, and my visit was very informative.

I asked about asylum seekers, who come to Finland mainly from Russia and Estonia, and some from elsewhere in eastern Europe. The Finnish police take the view that it would be illegal to detain people who come as asylum seekers. There are reception centres, quite properly, but no detention centres.

Mr. Winnick: I do not make a party point, although it will probably be interpreted as such, and I accept entirely that the hon. Gentleman speaks from a genuine wish for tolerance. I do not question that at all, but what he says seems to conflict with the attitude of Liberal councillors in my constituency and in the Walsall borough, as demonstrated in correspondence and speeches relating to a single family that is to be housed temporarily in a ward represented by a Liberal Democrat councillor. I have pointed out before that there seems to be a discrepancy between the hon. Gentleman's fine words—again, I entirely accept his genuineness and sincerity—and those of some of his councillors.

Mr. Hughes: Obviously, I do not know the details of the case, but if the hon. Gentleman is concerned about it, I am happy to see any correspondence or documentation that he wants to give me. I shall not prejudge the matter. No one is perfect and our councillors may be wrong; they may be right. I cannot judge, but I have sometimes been in difficulty on the same subject. I understand the pressures and the difficulties, but we must be clear about the issues. I have large numbers of asylum seekers in my constituency and I am aware of the potential issues that that can generate in the community. If there are matters that the hon. Gentleman wants to bring to my attention, I shall make sure that they are examined.

Mr. Winnick: I am grateful.

Mr. Hughes: If there is a serious allegation, I would rather see the documents that support it.

There are various stages in the treatment of asylum seekers, during which it is possible to test whether discrimination exists. If the amendment were accepted, it might affect other matters, such as the financial support systems. We would argue that it should not be possible to discriminate generally by people's ethnic origin and where they come from, and that there should be no generalisation in respect of the dispersal system around the country or the withdrawal of support.

The amendment would also make it unlawful to discriminate directly or indirectly on any racial grounds, including race, colour, nationality, citizenship, or ethnic or national origin, with regard to support arrangements, finance and so on. However, there could still be positive measures to help people who, for example, may not speak English. People with particular needs may require positive action and extra support. It is a difficult debate, but I understand that such exceptions will be lawful, because they come under another part of the Act—section 53—which allows special needs to be looked after.

We are discussing a difficult matter, open to misinterpretation if we are not careful. It will be much better regulated by clear language, rather than open-ended language, and by Parliament dealing with the issue, rather than leaving it for subsequent authorisation. It is clear that in such difficult areas of policy—refugees, immigration, asylum seekers and the like—decisions must be seen to be fair by applicants and their representatives, and by society as a whole.

5.15 pm

I hope that the Minister will give an assurance either that he is willing to consider the proposition that we have advanced or that the authorisations will cover only the sort of list that I described when I discussed the five examples contained in our amendment. If he gave a categorical statement about what the authorisations would cover,

even if he did so on a later occasion, that would be some consolation to those of us who are interested in the matter, both in the House and outside it. The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead made it clear that there was such interest.

Mr. Lidington: We should remind ourselves of two points. First, illegal immigration remains a serious challenge for this country. Attempts at illegal immigration are frequently assisted by organised criminals who traffic in human beings, much as they might traffic in drugs or other contraband goods. Secondly, the officials whom we charge with enforcing our system of immigration control have to take complicated decisions that involve judgments about the quality of evidence that they receive from individuals. They might also have to take such decisions, which are of great importance, quickly and under great pressure. Those officials deserve to know that Parliament will provide them with certainty about what they are, and are not, allowed to do.

I, and, I am sure, hon. Members from all parties, have sat alongside entry clearance officers at posts overseas, immigration officers at ports and case workers at the Croydon headquarters of the immigration and nationality directorate. On each occasion, I was struck by the professionalism of the officers concerned—they have absolute commitment and try to examine the merits of a case and the quality of evidence that is presented to them—and by the immense responsibility that we devolve to them when they take decisions about cases involving individual men, women and children.

As I made clear in Committee and earlier, I start from the premise that some immigration exemption is necessary. I was persuaded by the arguments that were contained in the letter of 26 January from Lord Bassam of Brighton to Lord Lester of Herne Hill, to which the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) alluded. Lord Bassam explained why the Home Office believed that some exemption for discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin should, in particular and defined circumstances, remain within the law. That remains my position.

I hear the arguments of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who said that his amendment would lead to greater clarity and greater control over ministerial discretion. However, as I listened to his speech, various questions occurred to me. He invites us to agree to an amendment that would limit the exemption to a list of specific functions of the immigration and nationality directorate and the migration and visa department of the Foreign Office, but what functions would his amendment exclude from the exemption?

The hon. Gentleman discussed the detention of various people. As I understand the arrangements for detaining people at the Oakington detention centre, decisions are made on the basis that, on the whole, people are sent there because the immigration officer at a port believes that they have a fairly straightforward case, about which an initial decision can be taken within relatively few days.

I have not examined the statistics in detail, but I think it conceivable that analysis of the nationalities of people detained in Oakington would show particular nationalities to be represented disproportionately, in terms of the proportion that they represented of the total number of seekers of asylum in the United Kingdom. If amendment No. 54 were passed, a court might conceivably decide that the fast-track rule applied in respect of Oakington was indirectly discriminatory on grounds of race. I think there is a danger that the amendment would introduce more rather than less ambiguity.

Although I do not close my mind to arguments in favour of further amendments, my inclination is to leave the provision as it stands.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I understand the hon. Gentleman's argument, too, and I accept that fast-track systems start with presumptions. However—in this regard, as in others, there may not be much between the hon. Gentleman's view and mine—whereas a presumption might be made that would put someone into a category in respect of consideration of his case, the actual consideration would be on the basis of the paperwork, the facts and the information collected. That, not national, ethnic or other discrimination, would be the determining factor.

Mr. Lidington: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but I still think that his amendment has the potential to reintroduce a measure of ambiguity.

I welcome Government amendment No. 3, which, as I read it, would remove from the scope of the exemption the powers—effectively—of a constable which were conferred on immigration officers by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. I think that the reference to sections 28A and 28K of the Immigration Act 1971 refers to new powers conferred by the 1999 Act. If so, I consider the amendment sensible.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There has been much discussion during the Bill's passage, both here and in another place, about the exemption for immigration and nationality functions provided in new section 19C in clause 1. Amendment No. 1 would remove altogether the exemption, and the associated provision creating an independent monitor whose function would be to account to Parliament on its operation. Amendment No. 54 would narrow the immigration exemption in new section 19C.

At present the Bill allows discrimination that is proper and necessary, on grounds of nationality or ethnic or national origin, in the carrying out of immigration and nationality functions. Those are defined as functions exercisable by any of the enactments listed in subsection (5). The amendment seeks to prescribe only a limited number of functions in which discrimination may occur.

I am fully aware of the concerns expressed about the immigration and nationality exemption. The Government have said on many occasions that it should be no wider than is absolutely necessary. The amendments, however, would damage our attempts to provide a fast, firm and fair immigration control. They ignore a number of the principal functions contained in the immigration legislation in which discrimination may well be proper and necessary. In particular, they would not permit discrimination in respect of the removal, deportation or detention of individuals who did not qualify for leave to enter or remain. Detention, for example, is sometimes necessary to enforce the removal of those who do not qualify for leave to remain, and who will not comply voluntarily with instructions to leave the United Kingdom.

As hon. Members will know, owing to operational factors such as the ready availability of national travel documentation, or the preparedness of other states to

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

allow us to return their nationals using other forms of documentation, some nationalities are easier to remove than others. In respect of certain nationalities, enforcing removal can be a prolonged process. In such cases, when there is no immediate prospect of removal, detention may not be appropriate.

It is necessary for the immigration service and the integrated casework directorate to conduct special nationality-specific exercises, involving the fast-tracking of cases in response to sudden or sustained influxes of certain nationals seeking to circumvent control. In particular, the immigration service needs to ensure that resources are targeted at the nationalities that offer the best prospect of successful removal, often in the light of other Governments' attitudes to accepting the return of their nationals. I am not convinced that the amendments would permit such activity.

At ports the immigration service requires the ability—under close ministerial supervision—to treat people differently on the basis of their nationality and, occasionally, their ethnic or national origin when it has intelligence that, for example, certain national travel documents are being abused, or individuals or groups of one nationality are presenting themselves as nationals of another country in order to benefit from compassionate policies or asylum procedures that are being applied to one nationality or ethnic group but not to others. The Kosovan situation is an obvious example.

We have encountered a number of rackets emanating from various countries. There are also many examples of the immigration system discriminating positively in favour of individuals on the basis of their nationality or ethnic or national origins. For example, in the past we have given special treatment to Kosovan Albanians, during the recent conflict in the Balkans. Kosovan Serbs were not treated in the same way, for obvious reasons.

There are other examples in which guidance to asylum caseworkers indicates that one ethnic or national group from a particular country should be treated differently from another. The ethnic or national origin of the applicant is a key consideration in the determination of applications for asylum and exceptional leave. It is clearly important to establish whether a particular ethnic group is the subject of some form of persecution in the country from which it comes, rather than another ethnic group. It would be impossible to operate a rational asylum process, requiring the immigration authorities to treat cases alike without always delving into the detail of each claim, if caseworkers were unable to make such distinctions. That would make the operation of the asylum and immigration system extremely difficult.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I hear what the Minister says, but in my constituency experience of dealing with huge numbers of such applications, at the end of the day Ministers and officials make decisions on the basis of the individual concerned, and—either initially, or if pressed—provide explanations. Is it not the case that, whatever may be the starting point of a policy, decisions are and should always be made on the basis of an individual's circumstances? We cannot get away from that.

Mr. O'Brien: Certainly each asylum application is decided on its individual merits. To that extent, the hon. Gentleman is right. The individual, however, comes with a history—a background. In the case of Kosovo, for instance, in which we operated special procedures in relation to ethnic Albanians, it was clearly relevant to determine whether an individual claiming to be an ethnic Albanian was indeed an ethnic Albanian. An ethnic Albanian coming from Kosovo rather than Albania itself might be given different treatment from an Albanian coming from Albania, or a Serb coming from Kosovo. On that basis, we had to examine not just individual circumstances, but the broader context. It was not necessary to look much further into the individual circumstances of a person identified as a Kosovan Albanian to decide how that person should be dealt with.

The hon. Gentleman is right in principle: when deciding whether to grant asylum, we should consider individual cases. However, the context in which the decision is made cannot be ignored.

5.30 pm

Mr. Cohen: I understand that the immigration service deals with nationality and ethnic origins in much of its case work, but at the heart of the Stephen Lawrence case and the subsequent inquiry lay the fact that there have been individual massive injustices caused by false stereotyping. That is what institutional racism is about. Why should the immigration and nationality service be exempt from provisions relating to institutional racism and false stereotyping when the police and many other public services are subject to those provisions? Why should an individual who is anti-Saddam Hussein be treated the same way as someone who is pro-Saddam Hussein, just because he or she comes from Iraq? It might be a false stereotype to assume that any applicant from Iraq should be turned down.

Mr. O'Brien: As we have already identified, when an asylum or immigration case is determined, the circumstances of the individual are important, as is the individual's background. I do not think that my hon. Friend and I disagree on that point. However, he appears to think that there is reason to believe that many, or at least a significant number, of the decisions taken by immigration officers are based on some sort of stereotyping or discriminatory intention. That is not my experience of the professional way in which decisions are normally taken. That is not to say that there have been no mistakes made—no public service is immune from the errors of individuals or the mendacity of a small minority—but, by and large, the immigration service bases its decisions on the proper and openly arrived at decision-making guidance issued by Ministers.

In his opening remarks, my hon. Friend mentioned Frances Webber. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has broad enough shoulders not to worry about criticism from that source, but he is certainly not facing both ways on the issues. He is trying to ensure that our record is that of a Government who promote a combination of the firm and fair immigration controls to which we committed ourselves in our manifesto and a strong commitment to race equality, which we have demonstrated throughout our term in office, both in the Bill and in the establishment of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry.

There is no question of facing two ways: our aim is to restore integrity to our asylum system so that it works for the genuine refugee, discourages those who would abuse

it or make unfounded claims and recognises the need to respect race equality. That is why we have tabled an amendment that makes a change that I am sure my hon. Friend wants. We think it is possible to do that because exemptions should be no wider than is necessary.

My hon. Friend quotes Frances Webber asking,

how . . . are we going to prove unlawful race discrimination . . . if it is not unlawful to discriminate . . . ?

That is a very lawyerly way of putting it—of course one cannot prove something to be unlawful if it is not unlawful. However, there are circumstances in which it is proper, lawful and right to discriminate, for example, when we were helping Kosovan Albanians. There should be no disagreement about that. The lawyer quoted is placing a lawyerly concern to win—to get at the immigration service—above the need for proper decision making and justice. I, as a Minister, am concerned to ensure that just decisions are made and public policy operates properly to achieve the openly articulated aim of the Government to ensure that we have a system of immigration control that is both fair and firm.

My hon. Friend asks whether junior civil servants have the ability to take unto themselves the exemption. The answer is no: a junior civil servant has no ability to say, "I have decided that, in that case, such a course of action is no longer discriminatory," nor does a senior civil servant, or the chief immigration officer. Immigration officers will operate under the guidance issued by Ministers, which is, by and large, in the public arena. My hon. Friend will be able to ascertain the criteria by which such decisions are made and the way in which they are reached.

In no sense does the Bill create an exemption that gives a civil servant broad discretion to discriminate. Civil servants will be able to discriminate properly and lawfully only when there is a clear instruction from the Minister to do so in specific circumstances, and those circumstances are mainly in the public arena. One of the actions taken by the Government after entering office—indeed, while I was Minister with responsibility for immigration—was to ensure that the guidance on how such decisions are made was put into the public domain and so made available to immigration lawyers such as Frances Webber. There is a degree of openness from which my hon. Friend can take solace. We do not accept that any official is entitled to discriminate in a way that is unacceptable to the Government.

Mr. Hughes: I shall not dispute the issue of openness with the Minister. I hope that he will now address the question of the timetable from now on governing the exemptions provided under the legislation. However, the example he gives works both ways. The House and the country had huge sympathy for Albanian Kosovans and everything started from there. However, I know from colleagues and from discussions with the Refugee Council when I visited Kosovo that some Serbian Kosovans felt that their case was prejudged against them, even though they had no history of acts of aggression or intimidation or other anti-social activities. The very generalisation that Albanian Kosovans should be considered together and regarded favourably and that Serbian Kosovans should not is worrying to me, because I know how much grief that presumption has caused over the past couple of years.

Mr. O'Brien: We considered Albanian Kosovans differently from Serbian Kosovans not because specific individuals might have been involved in activities that, in retrospect, they would not have been proud of, but in the light of evidence of persecution of a particular ethnic minority. Obviously, in Kosovo at that time, the issue was whether Albanians were suffering persecution, not whether Serbs were. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that point.

I recognise that neither my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) nor the Liberal Democrats intend to frustrate control, even though that would be the effect of their amendments. The Government accept that the amendments were tabled for bona fide reasons, even though we cannot accept them. We are concerned that they would deprive us of the ability to preserve the integrity of immigration control.

The provisions in the Bill to ensure that any discrimination in the sphere of immigration and nationality is justified are quite strict. Such discrimination must be in accordance with the provisions of the various enactments, or must be authorised by Ministers who, in turn, are accountable to Parliament. Such instructions are normally in the public arena, although there might be security issues relating to specific individuals or circumstances that oblige Ministers to decide otherwise—no doubt, hon. Members can work out for themselves the circumstances in which a Minister might decide not to make such matters public.

Precisely because there have been concerns, we took the view that there should be a race monitor to ensure that the decisions made by the immigration service were made properly and subject to some public scrutiny. The race monitor will have free access to all of the IND's papers. He or she will also be able to call on the IND to provide an individual file. However, I make it very clear that the monitor should not be a surrogate appellate authority. It is not the monitor's job to examine an individual case and to make decisions on it. The monitor's job is to look at the broad array of cases and at a selection of cases and to determine whether, as a whole, immigration control is being operated within the spirit of this legislation. The race monitor will, therefore, monitor the immigration service and the IND to ensure that the legislation's spirit is being properly adhered to.

The current entry clearance monitor, who provides real accountability to Parliament, provides a very successful precedent for the role of race monitor. The entry clearance monitor will report annually to Parliament, and I know that many hon. Members pay great heed to the views that the monitor expresses. We very much hope that the race monitor will have the same type of credibility and impact, so that Ministers, too, pay great heed to what is said by him or her.

I am satisfied that we have struck the right balance, and therefore urge my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead to consider withdrawing amendment No. 1.

Government amendment No. 3 would modify the exemption for immigration and nationality functions in clause 1, new section 19C. As I said, we have consistently made clear our view that the exemption should be no wider than is absolutely necessary to safeguard the effective operation of immigration control. We have reached the view that a refinement to the immigration exemption can be made in the interests of securing the Bill's objectives without the risk of harm to immigration control.

[Mr. O'Brien]

The amdendment is designed to remove from the scope of the immigration exemption sections 28A to 28K of the Immigration Act 1971 as they relate to offences under part III of that Act. Those offences include seeking to obtain leave to enter or remain by deception, facilitating the entry of an illegal entrant into the United Kingdom, and possessing false immigration documents—such as passports, visas and work permits—for use. Many of those offences are committed by our own citizens, although some may be commissioned only by those subject to immigration control.

The amendment would place the immigration service, in the investigation and prosecution of such offences, on the same legal basis as police—with whom they often participate in joint operations—in operating the Bill's provisions.

It is right that the investigation and prosecution of offences should be based on some objective evidence or intelligence, rather than on an individual's nationality or ethnic or national origin. The immigration service does not prioritise the investigation of such offences by nationality. It is also right that the immigration service and police should be subject to the same legal constraints in carrying out similar activities, often conducted together. Those constraints will not harm or hinder the administration of justice or action against those engaged in immigration fraud or human trafficking.

Immigration service functions that support the removal or deportation of individuals from the United Kingdom will, however, remain within the scope of the exemption. As I said, it is sometimes necessary to prioritise cases for removal on the basis of nationality in response to particular pressures on control or as a result of the attitude of other Governments towards accepting the return of their own nationals.

The amendment contains a justifiable refinement to the immigration exemption. We have listened carefully to the concerns expressed by hon. Members and by Members of another place, and we have taken action to ensure that the exemption is no wider than is necessary. I hope that the House will accept this Government amendment to new section 19C.

Mr. Hughes: When does the Minister expect new authorisations in relation to this part of the Bill to be made?

Mr. O'Brien: I cannot give a date now, but we would want to implement the provisions as soon as we possibly can. Although we would have to take account of the analysis of controls that is currently being done, we would, as I said, want to implement the provisions as soon as reasonably possible. I undertake to write to the hon. Gentleman and to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) to let them know when we anticipate implementing them.

5.45 pm

Government amendment No. 35 provides that a finding of unlawful discrimination by the independent appellate authority in an immigration case will trigger the power of the Commission for Racial Equality to seek an injunction under section 62 of the Race Relations Act 1976.

Government amendment No. 36 extends section 66 of the 1976 Act to allow the CRE to give assistance to people in immigration proceedings before the independent appellate or the special immigration appeals commission.

Government amendment No. 37 amends section 67 and will protect applicants whose visa applications are successful, but who nevertheless consider that they have been racially discriminated against by an entry clearance officer. It ensures that redress is available in the county court.

Government amendments Nos. 41 and 42 extend the Lord Chancellor's current jurisdiction under the Special Immigration Appeals Commission Act 1997 to make rules.

Government amendments Nos. 44 and 45 are technical ones to ensure that in cases in which a claim of racial discrimination has been certified as manifestly unfounded, an adjudicator is able to determine whether it was correct for the Home Secretary to issue a certificate when the claim was made and to make a decision on that certificate. A consequential amendment has also been made to the equivalent certification provisions on human rights and asylum in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

I hope that the House will accept not only these technical and consequential amendments, but the more substantive amendments that I have outlined.

Mr. Cohen: My amendment No. 1 was always a probing amendment, to express concern and to get answers, and I appreciate the answers that the Minister has given. I particularly welcomed his answers as they touched on the role of civil servants and the race monitor and on the transparency of the criteria. I am still concerned, however, about the broad exemption being granted to the service. It is too great in the case of the IND and it should have been reined in a bit more. Although I heard the Minister's comments about exemptions being no wider than necessary, I do not think that the exemption granted to the IND should be any wider than that granted to other public services.

Nevertheless, I also appreciate the full answers that the Minister has given to my questions. I also realise that the Home Secretary has broad shoulders, and that he will not be too worried about the comments of Frances Webber that I quoted.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendments made: No. 3, in page 2, line 41, after "1999" insert—

'but excluding sections 28A to 28K of the Immigration Act 1971 so far as they relate to offences under Part III of that Act'.

No. 4, in page 3, leave out lines 46 and 47.— *[Mr. Touhig.]*

Clause 2

SPECIFIED AUTHORITIES: GENERAL STATUTORY DUTY

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I beg to move amendment No. 5, in page 4, line 5, leave out from beginning to "due" in line 6 and insert—

', in carrying out its functions, have'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 6 to 10, 24, 26 and 28.

Mr. Tipping: Government amendment No. 5 alters the wording of the new general duty on public authorities to

promote race equality to reflect better the Government's policy intention. It makes it clear that public authorities, rather than simply putting arrangements in place to have regard to the need to work towards the elimination of unlawful racial discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups, must have regard to that duty. Although they should of course make arrangements to meet that obligation, greater focus is placed in this amendment on the outcome rather than on the process itself. The wording follows the approach taken in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and has the support of the Commission for Racial Equality. I commend the amendment to the House.

I deal now with Government amendments Nos. 8 and 9, which are perhaps slighter than the preceding one. Many public authorities are already subject to various statutory duties imposed by other legislation. I cite as an example the Greater London Authority Act 1999, which subjects the Greater London Authority to a duty in relation to equality of opportunity for all people. In clause 2, the proposed new section 71(2) of the Race Relations Act 1976 will allow, by order, the Secretary of State to impose on bodies that are subject to the general duty to promote racial equality specific duties aimed at ensuring their better performance of that duty.

The proposed section 71(6) in clause 2 allows the Secretary of State to make

> such incidental, supplementary or consequential provision

as appropriate when, by an order under the proposed section 71(5), he amends the list of public authorities subject to the duty in schedule 1A.

We wish to have similar powers in the proposed section 71(6) in relation to orders as those made under the proposed section 71(2). That will allow the Secretary of State, when making such orders, to amend other legislation imposing duties on bodies in order to remove any overlaps on the duties. That is necessary to avoid a body becoming subject to separate but possibly conflicting duties.

Amendments Nos. 6, 7 and 10 are technical drafting amendments. Amendment No. 24 adds a new entry to schedule 1A to bring the coverage in Scotland of certain health bodies under the general duty into line with coverage of the Bill in England and Wales. Amendment No. 26 adds regional development agencies, Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise to the schedule, along with the London development agency which was already in it. Certain housing bodies covered by the existing section 71 duty are added by amendment No. 28 so that they remain seamlessly specified for the purpose of the new duty. That extends the scope of the bodies covered. I commend the amendments to the House.

Mr. Lidington: I am grateful to the Minister for the way in which he moved the amendments. I understand the Government's reasons for proposing the new draft of the general statutory duty, but I would like to press him on the Government's thinking on what they expect public authorities to deliver under the statutory duty. It is important for the Government to clarify their thinking, given that we are proposing to grant the Secretary of State extensive powers by order to impose specific requirements on individual public authorities if he believes that they are failing to comply with the general duty. That marks a significant departure from the arrangements set out in section 71 of the Race Relations Act 1976, which places a duty on every local authority to make appropriate arrangements to carry out their functions with a view to the need

> (a) to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination; and
>
> (b) to promote equality of opportunity, and good relations between persons of different racial groups.

The 1976 Act does not give the Secretary of State the power to step in to say that a local authority is failing in that duty. However, under the Bill, central Government will be able to insist on certain actions being taken or certain codes being adhered to so that a local authority or group of local authorities complies with the Government's view of how to give effect to the general duty. That is important, partly for the parliamentary reason that the order-making power is subject only to the negative resolution procedure. It could come into effect without any debate or formal approval by this or the other House.

More important, when we judge the amendments and the definition of the statutory duty, we need to pay careful regard to the specific obligations that we wish to impose on specific public authorities as a result of what is phrased in fairly general terms in the Bill. I hope that the Minister will give us some idea of his thinking on that.

The precedent set by the 1976 Act shows that in the 24 years in which local councils have been under a statutory duty, most have used the requirement in section 71 to good effect in serving their local communities. That is how I would like things to continue.

However, certain local authorities have hit the headlines because they have interpreted the duty in the 1976 Act in a way that many people have found outrageous and not in accord with their expectations of their local council. In the past couple of weeks, the report of the Runnymede Trust's commission, which was chaired by Lord Parekh, has been published. Although I do not disagree with everything in the report, it calls for a much greater degree of central Government interference in promoting good relations than I believe to be justified.

We are told by the media that Home Office Ministers had intended to welcome the report with open arms and to announce several specific measures to give effect to some of its recommendations. It is not unfair to ask the Minister what he expects local councils and other public authorities to do that they are not doing already. For example, do the Government intend to impose on all public authorities the more onerous requirements of ethnic monitoring that the Runnymede Trust's report recommends?

To take things to the extreme, do the Government foresee that they might want to implement what I would regard as one of the daftest recommendations in the report—namely, that museums and art galleries whose exhibitions do not comply with the Government's idea of what promotes racial equality should lose some of their funding? The report is explicit in that it recommends:

> Organisations funded by public bodies should lose some of their funding if they do not make changes in their staff and governance and do not demonstrably make their programmes and activities more inclusive.

The amendments and clause 2 will give the Home Secretary or his colleagues in the Cabinet the power by an order, which is subject only to the negative resolution

[Mr. Lidington]

procedure, to instruct a local authority museum or art gallery to change its way of doing things. If it does not do what he prescribes, it will stand to lose its grant.

In our previous debates, the Minister has also shown himself to be a reasonable chap who wishes to argue constructively, so I hope that he will be able to reassure me that my fears are misplaced. Given the general terms in which the statutory duty is defined in legislation, it is only fair to ask the Government to be more specific about the practical measures that they wish authorities to undertake or that they will seek to impose on them.

Mr. Simon Hughes: We welcome clause 2, to which the Minister has introduced further amendments today. We have argued for it in the House of Lords and in Committee. We are very keen to have this new development in race relations legislation which will oblige authorities to do two things. They will have to have regard—the Minister has suggested a change of words, but keeping the same principle—to the need to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination. It is not a matter of waiting for the court case but of dealing with matters in advance and being proactive.

Secondly, authorities will have to promote equality of opportunity and good relations. Those are good things, and it is good that these provisions are in the Bill. The amendments proposed by the Minister are also welcome; they seem to be entirely consistent.

6 pm

The comments of the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) included two fair points, to which the Minister may be planning to respond. First, the hon. Gentleman asked the Minister to amplify in what way the Government would expect, and people should expect, the legislation to be enacted. Secondly, he alluded to the report sponsored by the Runnymede Trust, the "Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain". I was going to say a word about it on Third Reading, but it seems logical to do so now.

It would be helpful if the Government indicated how they will respond to the list of proposals in the report. I was away on the day it was released, but I realised that the content of the report got hijacked by, clouded by and coloured by the proposal on what we call the country and getting rid of the word "Britain". That was not a key proposal, as I understand it, but just one of the things in the report.

There are none the less a significant number of proposals in the report, including a list of points for immediate action. I only have the report's summary here, but I know that the Government have many of the items, both general and specific, on their agenda. I refer to introducing a single equality act, setting up a human rights commission and legislating to prohibit direct and indirect discrimination on grounds of religion or belief—all matters to which the Government have at some time said they are committed.

I hope that the Minister will respond in general terms to the request about how the Government propose to respond to the report. I hope that once the initial wave of comment has died down, there will be a positive and considered response to each proposal. The report appears to be on all fours with the attempts by many people to have the promotion of good race relations and equal opportunity as part of the duty of those of us in public service and in public life.

Mr. Tipping: I am grateful for the general support from the hon. Members for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). The point of difference between them was the difference in emphasis and concentration on the Runnymede Trust's report which has been published fairly recently and has led to some controversy.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey was right to say that the focus had been on one section of the report—the notion of Britishness. The Home Secretary has made his position on that clear. He has also made his position, and that of the Government, clear on the Runnymede Trust's report. We welcome the report; it contains many recommendations that can be built on. There are also recommendations that go against the grain of what the Government are doing. Suffice it to say that we generally welcome the report, are working on its propositions and intend to come forward with proposals to take the debate further.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury made two important points. He said that this was a very important subject, and indeed it is. The duty to promote is the key to the Bill, so it is important to get these provisions right. Secondly, he talked strongly and positively about local authorities, and I agree with him on that. Politicians are not very good at praising success; neither are Governments, of whichever colour. Local authorities, as has already been said, are very successful. We need to use our regulatory framework; bodies such as Ofsted and the Audit Commission, instead of always identifying weakness, should identify and promote success. Successful local authorities should be used as vehicles to drive change forward.

As the hon. Gentleman said, many local authorities have a good deal of which to be proud. There have been occasional mishaps when local authorities may have been over-zealous in their approach. However, concentrating on the best and on bringing everyone up to the standard of the best is the right approach.

I was asked directly how the Government intend to proceed. As I said earlier, we are using as our model the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The phrasing is almost the same. The hon. Gentleman, who takes an interest in these matters, knows that in Northern Ireland we are consulting on how to do this. Public authorities do not come in one shape or size. There are different degrees of public authority. The hon. Gentleman talked earlier of vicars in the Church of England pursuing a public role. That public role is only a small proportion of their work. It is important that we consult and that we are proportionate in our approach and do not bring forward a set of measures that will not work for organisations of different size and complexity.

The hon. Gentleman asked me directly what we would be looking at and looking for. He used local authorities as his example, so perhaps I can too. It is important that local authorities introduce policies that meet the needs of the entire community, so it is important to consult the entire community about how best to do that. In a social services department, areas in which policy will need to

have some focus would be the kind of meals on wheels that are supplied to the entire community, and the variety of choice that there is. Similarly, the care of people from a black and Asian background in residential accommodation is a difficult and complex area. It will be important for local authorities to consult about that, introduce policies and have ways of measuring those policies to ensure that people from a black and Asian background really are taking up meals on wheels and, if not—as is often the case these days—why not. It is important for local authorities to take that into account in relation to social policies.

It is also important for local authorities to follow this approach in relation to their employment policies. Some do, very satisfactorily, but some do not. If public authorities claim to be equal opportunities employers, as many do, but do not appear to deliver when one considers their work force, it is important that local authorities consult all the community and have policies that are acceptable to all the community on the way in which staff are advertised for and recruited. They should ensure that if people from any ethnic background are not represented and there appear to be handicaps in the way of that happening, they should introduce policies to resolve the matter.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury said that he enjoyed working with me. I enjoy working with him, and I have enjoyed doing so on this Bill. These amendments are about ensuring that we set up mechanisms for public authorities, including local authorities, to have in place policies that meet the needs of the black and Asian community and to measure them.

In closing, let me simply say that the range of measures on which consultation will take place depends on the size and complexity of the public authority. As I said earlier, the Home Office is very clear that this is not a "one approach fits all" method. I hope that that satisfies the hon. Gentleman.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 6, in page 4, line 19, at end insert—

'(b) may make different provision for different purposes.'.

No. 7, in page 4, line 25, leave out "which" and insert "who".

No. 8, in page 4, line 27, after "subsection" insert "(2) or".

No. 9, in page 4, line 46, leave out—

'section 74 so far as it applies'

and insert—

'sections 71(6) and 74 so far as they apply'.

No. 10, in page 5, line 3, leave out "which" and insert "who".—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Clause 3

CERTAIN APPOINTMENT FUNCTIONS OUTSIDE THE EMPLOYMENT FIELD

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 11, in page 8, line 3, leave out "or refused".

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 12 to 18 and 32.

Mr. Tipping: Clause 3 already makes provision in relation to the coverage of public appointments, dignities and honours under the Race Relations Act 1976. These amendments will improve the current provision in the Bill in two ways. First, they will make improvements to the drafting of the provision. More substantively, they will bring within the scope of the provision a substantial new area—that of discrimination involving the terms and conditions of appointments or the termination of the appointment.

I shall deal with the latter, more substantive matter first. I note that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is nodding. I think that he can take pride in this matter, which he pursued in Committee. We gave an undertaking to reflect on it, and I hope that we have met his needs to a large extent. The Government propose to extend the protection against discrimination in relation to appointments that is provided under section 76 of the Race Relations Act 1976, as amended under the Bill. It should cover discrimination not only in the arrangements for determining who should be appointed, but in the terms and conditions of the appointment, in the termination of the appointment or in subjecting the appointee to any other detriment.

Thus, overall, it will be unlawful for a Minister or Department to discriminate in relation to the terms of the appointment; the way the appointee is afforded access to opportunities for promotion, transfer, training or any other benefits, facilities or services; the refusal or omission to afford access to such things; the termination of the appointment; or subjecting the appointee to any other detriment. Discrimination against appointees and potential appointees will be unlawful in those circumstances where it is unlawful against employees under section 4(2) of the Race Relations Act, thereby improving the protection afforded to appointees by our race discrimination legislation.

Some drafting improvements have also been made to those provisions. The position for negative recommendations and refusals, including deliberate omissions, is now set out separately, making it clearer that they are covered by the provisions, as are positive recommendations and approvals.

The drafting for the extension of the Act to appointments, dignities and honours made on the recommendation or approval of Ministers or Departments has been brought more into line with the drafting of the existing provision in section 76(2) of the Act for appointments made by Ministers or Departments. The effect is to clarify the application of the provision, making it clear that a Minister or Department, in making recommendations or approvals, should do nothing that would be unlawful under the Act—as though the appointee were an employee, and the Crown the employer. It has been made clear that the sanctions provided under sections 53(2) to 53(4) are the only sanctions on the appointments, conferments and other acts covered by section 76.

The opportunity has been taken to introduce provisions to ensure that not only the recommendations and approvals of Ministers and Departments in relation to life peerages but those of bodies set up by Ministers for that purpose are covered by the provisions. The Committee spent some time considering this complex matter and we

[Mr. Tipping]

have listened to its views. I hope that the amendments represent improvements, and I commend them to the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am grateful to the Government for responding to our concerns. They do not represent three-star, flashing light, huge legislative matters. I do not pretend that they are the central part of the Government's programme.

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman underestimates his powers.

6.15 pm

Mr. Hughes: Even on our shopping list, they are not matters that we would have died for in Committee. None the less, the Government have tried to bring within the same system appointments or selections under the slightly anomalous routes by which people are given honours. As far as I and those who advise me have been able to work out, our concerns have been met. A minor caveat remains in that I am not sure that the Minister can be absolutely certain that the small print is perfect. However, I am pleased that the Bill has been improved; it will become more consistent legislation. I am grateful to those behind the scenes who have helped to make that happen.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 12, in page 8, line 7, leave out first "the" and insert "a".

No. 13, in page 8, line 9, leave out "or refused".

No. 14, in page 8, line 11, leave out from "giving" to end of line 18 and insert—

'the approval, and in making the arrangements for determining who should be recommended or approved, the Minister of the Crown or government department shall not do an act which would be unlawful under section 4 if the recommendation or approval were an offer of employment and the Crown were the employer for the purposes of this Act.

(6) Subsections (3) to (5) do not apply in relation to the making of negative recommendations.

(6A) Subsection (6C) applies to—

(a) any negative recommendation made by a Minister of the Crown or government department, or any refusal to make a recommendation by such a Minister or department, in relation to an appointment to an office or post where section 4 does not apply in relation to the appointment, and

(b) any approval refused by such a Minister or department in relation to any such appointment.

(6B) Subsection (6C) also applies to—

(a) any negative recommendation made by a Minister of the Crown or government department, or any refusal to make a recommendation by such a Minister or department, in relation to a conferment by the Crown of a dignity or honour; and

(b) any approval refused by such a Minister or department in relation to any such conferment.

(6C) In making a negative recommendation or in refusing to make a recommendation or give an approval, and in making the arrangements for determining whether to make such a recommendation or refusal, the Minister of the Crown or government department shall not do an act which would be unlawful under section 4 if the recommendation or refusal were a refusal to offer the person concerned employment and the Crown were the employer for the purposes of this Act.

(6D) Subsection (6E) applies in relation to any appointment to an office or post where section 4 does not apply and—

(a) the appointment is made by a Minister of the Crown or government department, or

(b) the office or post is an office or post in relation to which a Minister of the Crown or government department has made a recommendation (other than a negative recommendation) or given an approval.

(6E) A Minister of the Crown or government department shall not do an act in connection with—

(a) the terms of the appointment;

(b) access for the person appointed to opportunities for promotion, transfer or training, or to any other benefits, facilities or services; or

(c) the termination of the appointment, or subjecting the person appointed to any other detriment;

which would be unlawful under section 4 if the Crown were the employer for the purposes of this Act.'.

No. 15, in page 8, line 21, after "(5)" insert—

', subsection (6C) or, in relation to an appointment falling within subsection (6D)(b), subsection (6E)'.

No. 16, in page 8, line 25, at end insert—

'( ) The sanctions provided by virtue of the operation of section 53(2) to (4) in relation to this section shall be the only sanctions under this Act in relation to appointments, conferments and other acts to which this section applies.'.

No. 17, in page 8, line 27, leave out from first "to" to end of line 28 and insert—

'refusal include references to deliberate omission;'.

No. 18, in page 8, line 31, at end insert—

'and

( ) references to Ministers of the Crown and government departments so far as they relate to the making of a recommendation or a refusal to make a recommendation, or the giving or refusal of an approval, in relation to a conferment of a peerage for life under section 1 of the Life Peerages Act 1958 include references to any body established by a Minister of the Crown to make such a recommendation to the Prime Minister or to determine whether to give such an approval.'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Clause 5

CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS AND PROCEEDINGS

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 19, in page 10, line 45, leave out "or".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 20, 23, 25, 34 and 49.

Mr. Tipping: These are technical and drafting amendments, but I hope that they are transparent. I intend to speak to them only briefly.

Amendment Nos. 19 and 20 are designed to ensure that the definition of criminal investigation applies, in the different circumstances that arise in Scotland, to the same extent as it does in England and Wales. In Scotland, authorities such as the vehicle inspectorate or the Health and Safety Executive have investigatory powers, but no power to conduct prosecutions. The definition of a criminal investigation at paragraph (b) of section 57(4B),

as inserted under clause 5, therefore does not cover investigations carried out by such bodies; nor does the definition at paragraph (a) of section 57(4B), since they will not necessarily always have a duty to conduct their investigations. The amendments are therefore needed to ensure that the definition of criminal investigations covers investigations carried out by such bodies in Scotland.

Under amendments Nos. 23 and 25, we propose to make minor technical amendments to two Scottish entries in schedule 1A, which lists specified public bodies for the purpose of the new duty to promote race equality.

Amendment No. 49 repeals a provision that provides for Scottish Homes to be subject to the existing duty to promote race equality under section 71. That duty will be made redundant by the new duty under the Bill, which will apply to Scottish Homes by virtue of amendment No. 28.

Amendment No. 34 will allow an enforcement notice served by the Commission for Racial Equality in respect of an immigration decision to be appealed in the civil courts. That will not restrict the commission's powers; it will simply place immigration decisions on the same footing as other areas of decision making under section 59 of the Race Relations Act 1976. I commend the amendments to the House.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 20, in page 11, line 3, after "conduct;" insert "or

(c) any investigation which is conducted by a person in carrying out functions to which section 19B applies and which in the circumstances may lead to a decision by that person to make a report to the procurator fiscal for the purpose of enabling him to determine whether criminal proceedings should be instituted;'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Clause 10

SHORT TITLE, COMMENCEMENT, EXTENT ETC.

Amendment made: No. 21, in page 14, line 35, leave out "Schedules 1" and insert "Schedules 2".—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Schedule 1

PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

Amendment made: No. 22, in page 16, line 2, leave out Schedule 1.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Schedule 2

BODIES AND OTHER PERSONS SUBJECT TO GENERAL STATUTORY DUTY

Amendments made: No. 23, in page 19, line 29, leave out "established" and insert "constituted".

No. 24, in page 19, line 30, at end insert—

'. A Special Health Board constituted under section 2 of that Act.'.

No. 25, in page 20, line 30, leave out—

'constituted under section 62A or 62B'

and insert—

'within the meaning of section 235(1)'.

No. 26, in page 21, line 6, at end insert—

'. A regional development agency established under the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 (other than the London Development Agency).

. Scottish Enterprise and Highland and Islands Enterprise, established under the Enterprise and New Towns (Scotland) Act 1990.'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 27, in page 21, line 13, at end insert—

'Other educational bodies

. Governing bodies of—

(a) educational establishments maintained by local education authorities;

(b) institutions within the further education sector (within the meaning of section 91(3) of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992); or

(c) institutions within the higher education sector (within the meaning of section 91(5) of the Act of 1992).

. The managers of a grant-aided school (within the meaning of section 135 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980).

. The managers of a central institution (within the meaning of section 135 of the Act of 1980).

. The board of management of a self-governing school (within the meaning of the Self-Governing Schools etc. (Scotland) Act 1989).

. The board of management of a college of further education (within the meaning of section 36(1) of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992).

. The governing body of an institution within the higher education sector (within the meaning of Part II of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992).'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 29 to 31, 33, 43, 46 to 48 and 50 to 53.

Mr. Tipping: The amendments add public sector educational bodies to the list of specified bodies for the purpose of the duty to promote race equality in clause 2. They also provide for a number of consequential amendments: in particular, the duty on educational bodies currently at section 19 of the Race Relations Act 1976, which is a more limited duty than the new duty, is being repealed. I draw that to the attention of the hon. Member for Aylesbury, who I know is concerned that disproportionate duties should not be imposed on schools and school governors.

One aspect of the amendments which I should explain for the avoidance of doubt is the apparent absence from the list of local education authorities—and in Scotland, education authorities. Those authorities are covered by the duty, but there is no need to make a specific reference to them, because the existing references to local authorities in the schedule cover local authorities in all their capacities, including their education capacity.

The amendments also take the opportunity to remove the requirement in the 1976 Act for a two-month period to elapse before proceedings against education bodies can be progressed through the courts. The original purpose was to provide the Secretary of State with the opportunity to investigate the case and direct the bodies against which the discrimination case was being brought, but the Government now agree with the Commission for Racial

[Mr. Tipping]

Equality, which recommended the change in its third review of the Act, as the delay is thought to be unnecessary.

The amendment relating to the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 amends schedules 4 and 5 of that Act, which require school organisation committees to have regard to the obligations placed on local education authorities and school governors in part III of the Race Relations Act 1976. The amendment requires school organisation committees also to have regard to the obligations placed on those bodies by clause 2 of the Bill.

The amendments ensure that educational bodies are subject to the duty to promote racial equality, as other public authorities are. That makes them important, and I commend them to the House.

Mr. Lidington: No one—least of all me—would quarrel with the proposition that it should be part of the duty of any responsible educational institution to help to promote good race relations and oppose racial discrimination. It would be hard to find a head teacher who would say that he or she was not already engaged in trying to give effect to that aspiration.

I want to flag up one or two concerns. Clause 2 and schedule 2 give the Government new powers to impose specific duties on public authorities—including, when Government amendment No. 27 is made, the state sector of education—if those impositions are necessary in order to make those bodies comply with their duty to promote good race relations. Having heard his response to my earlier comments on this theme, I emphasise to the Minister that it is of the utmost importance that there is thorough consultation with practitioners in the education sector.

We all want schools and colleges to play their part in building a society in which the various ethnic communities respect one another, but it is important to do that without prejudice to what is surely the prime duty of schools—to promote high standards of achievement for all pupils, regardless of ethnic background.

I refer again to the recommendations of the Runnymede Trust report. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), that most of the previous debate on that report concerned its references to the notion of Britishness, but my criticism of it is more that its conclusions place too much faith in the beneficent power of Government intervention.

The Parekh committee gave us a list of specific proposals concerning educational institutions. There is a proposal that the national authorities should require local education authorities and schools to keep substantially more detailed and helpful statistics on ethnicity than hitherto. The committee also recommended that all higher education institutions should review and improve their arrangements for encouraging access for students from the ethnic minorities—again, a principle with which no one in the House would quarrel, but the extent to which central Government should seek to impose a specific view of how that objective should be attained is a matter for debate.

The Parekh committee recommended that schools and colleges alike should review their courses and syllabuses with a view to making them culturally more inclusive "wherever appropriate". Of course, the devil is in that phrase, different people's interpretation of which may vary tremendously.

The Minister's consultation with schools and colleges should be serious and thorough, and he should treat with appropriate scepticism the pressures that will undoubtedly be brought to bear on him constantly to have new codes, duties and guidelines handed down from Whitehall to individual schools and colleges. What I said earlier in respect of local authorities is the key to identifying examples of best practice and encouraging their wider dissemination. That, rather than a centralised, prescriptive approach, will work best.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I had a word with the Minister for School Standards the other day and put to her the concern felt by many heads and deputy heads about the proliferation of paperwork. She assured me that the Government were on target to deliver reductions in paperwork. I think she said that there would be a third fewer bits of paper this year and only half as many next year. That is absolutely the right principle. I am the chair of governors of a primary school and I know that that is right, but if, as a result of this Bill, there has to be any more paperwork, let us ensure that there is as little as possible; that it is sent by non-paper means whenever possible; and that bits of paper that have to be sent are sent at the same time as other bits of paper, in as few bundles a year as possible.

Mr. Tipping: I am grateful for the comments of the hon. Members for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), who both acknowledged that there is already good practice in many schools. It is important to build on that good practice so that the standards of the less good reach those of the best.

The hon. Member for Aylesbury spoke specifically about the need to consult practitioners. It is the intention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to ensure that practitioners' views are heard.

I heard what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said. Schoolteachers say to me, too, "Don't send us paperwork—send us pound notes." They want investment in education in real terms, to make a difference. It is no secret that the current Secretary of State has taken a close interest in this part of the Bill. Like my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards, he is determined that the obligations—the rules from the centre—diminish, and keen that any new obligations that are put on schools are proportionate and that, again, there will be consultation on those matters.

6.30 pm

The good practice at the moment springs in part from the fact that there is already an obligation on schools under sections 17 and 18 of the Race Relations Act. Schools are liable to challenge. The Bill brings forward a new duty—the duty to promote. Again, one of the issues that one would need to look at is the steps, say, that a small village school with perhaps a head teacher and one other teacher might want to take, as against a large comprehensive school with 100 teachers on its staff. Again, it is important that we get that right, that we do

not make unrealistic objections and place unrealistic demands on the attitude of schools. We think that, taken carefully, thoughtfully and, most important, practically, the Bill can make a real difference to schools. Again, I am grateful for Opposition Members' support.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 28, in page 21, line 13, at end insert—

'Other housing bodies

. The Housing Corporation.

. Scottish Homes.

. A housing action trust established under Part III of the Housing Act 1988.'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Schedule 3

CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendments made: No. 29, in page 21, line 26, at end insert—

'. In section 17 of the 1976 Act (prohibition on discrimination by certain education bodies), in the Table—

(a) in paragraph 7 for "73(c) or (d)" there is substituted "73(d)"; and

(b) after paragraph 7 there is inserted—

"7AA. A grant-aided school, within the meaning of section 135 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980.	*The managers of the school."*

No. 30, in page 21, line 26, at end insert—

'. In section 27(1) of the 1976 Act (extent of Part III) for "19" there is substituted "18D".'.

No. 31, in page 21, line 27, leave out—

'the 1976 Act (extent of Part III)'

and insert "that Act".

No. 32, in page 21, line 38, after "76(5)" insert—

'or (6C) or by virtue of section 76(6D)(b) and (6E)'.

No. 33, in page 21, line 38, at end insert—

'. In section 57(5) of that Act (claims under Part III in relation to certain educational bodies)—

(a) for the words "section 19(1)" there is substituted "subsection (5A)"; and

(b) the words from "and" to the end of the subsection are omitted.

. After section 57(5) of that Act there is inserted—

"(5A) This subsection applies to—

(a) local education authorities in England and Wales;

(b) education authorities in Scotland; and

(c) any body which is a responsible body in relation to an establishment falling within paragraph 3, 3B or 7B of the table in section 17." '.

No. 34, in page 21, line 38, at end insert—

'. In section 59(1)(b) of that Act (appeal against non-discrimination notice) after "the court" there is inserted "(ignoring section 57A)".'.

No. 35, in page 21, line 38, at end insert—

'. In section 62(1) of that Act (persistent discrimination) after "or" at the end of paragraph (b) there is inserted—

"(ba) a finding under the Special Immigration Appeals Commission Act 1997 or Part IV of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 that he has done an act which was unlawful by virtue of section 19B; or"'.

No. 36, in page 22, line 1, at end insert—

'. After section 66(7) of that Act (assistance by Commission) there is added—

"(8) This section (except for subsection (4)) applies to proceedings or prospective proceedings under the Special Immigration Appeals Commission Act 1997 or Part IV of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 so far as they relate to acts which may be unlawful by virtue of section 19B as it applies to proceedings or prospective proceedings under this Act.

(9) In this section as it applies by virtue of subsection (8) "rules and regulations" means—

(a) in relation to proceedings under the Act of 1997, rules under section 5 or 8 of that Act;

(b) in relation to proceedings under Part IV of the Act of 1999, rules under paragraph 3 or 4 of Schedule 4 to that Act."'.

No. 37, in page 22, line 1, at end insert—

'. After section 67(3) of that Act (extension of jurisdiction of county courts and sheriff courts) there is inserted—

"(3A) A designated county court or a sheriff court shall have jurisdiction to entertain proceedings under this Act with respect to an act done outside the United Kingdom where section 19B applies in relation to such an act by virtue of section 27(1A)." '.

No. 38, in page 22, line 13, leave out "75(1)" and insert "75(2)".

No. 39, in page 22, leave out lines 14 to 16 and insert—

' "(2A) Subsections (1) and (2) do not apply in relation to the provisions mentioned in subsection (2B).

(2B) Sections 19B to 19E, sections 71 to 71E (including Schedule 1A) and section 76 bind the Crown; and the other provisions of this Act so far as they relate to those provisions shall be construed accordingly (including, in particular, references to employment in Part IV)." '.

No. 40, in page 22, line 17, after "Act" insert "—

(a) for "and (2)" there is substituted "to (2B)"; and

(b)".

No. 41, in page 23, line 18, at end insert—

'. In section 5 of that Act (procedure in relation to jurisdiction under section 2 of that Act etc.)—

(a) in subsection (1)(a) after "2" there is inserted "or 2A";

(b) in subsection (1)(b) for "that section" there is substituted "section 2 or 2A above"; and

(c) in subsection (2) after "2" there is inserted "or 2A" '.

No. 42, in page 23, line 18, at end insert—

'. In Schedule 2 to that Act (appeals: supplementary)—

(a) in paragraph 4 after "2" there is inserted "or 2A"; and

(b) in paragraphs 6 and 7 after "2" there is inserted "and 2A".'.

No. 43, in page 23, line 18, at end insert—

'School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (c.31)

. In paragraph 8(b) of Schedule 4 to the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (school organisation committees to have regard to certain obligations owed by local education authorities and governing bodies under the Race Relations Act 1976) after "Part III" there shall be inserted "or section 71".

. In paragraph 6(b) of Schedule 5 to the Act of 1998 (adjudicators to have regard to certain obligations owed by local education authorities and governing bodies under the Race Relations Act 1976) after "Part III" there shall be inserted "or section 71".

No. 44, in page 23, line 42, after "(appeals)," insert—

'in paragraph 9(2) for the words "that the claim is one to which this paragraph applies" there is substituted "with the opinion expressed in the Secretary of State'

s certificate". .

. In that Schedule to that Act.'.

No. 45, in page 24, line 7, leave out from beginning to "paragraph 22" and insert—

'with the opinion expressed in the Secretary of State's certificate.'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Schedule 4

REPEALS

Amendments made: No. 46, in page 24, line 13, column 3, at end insert—

'Section 19.	
Section 19ZA.	
In section 57(5), the words from "and" to the end of the subsection.	
Section 58(6).	
In section 68, subsection (2)(b) and the word "or" immediately preceding it and, in subsection (3), the words "or, as the case may be, eight" and "or (b)".'.	

No. 47, in page 24, line 17, column 3, at end insert—

'1980 c. 44.	Education (Scotland) Act 1980.	In Schedule 4, paragraph 14.'.

No. 48, in page 24, line 26, column 3, at end insert—

'1988 c. 40.	Education Reform Act 1988.	In Schedule 12, paragraphs 19 and 79.'.

No. 49, in page 24, line 26, column 3, at end insert—

'1988 c. 43	Housing (Scotland) Act 1988.	Section 2(11).'.

No. 50, in page 24, line 27, column 3, at end insert—

'1989 c. 39.	Self-Governing Schools etc. (Scotland) Act 1989.	In Schedule 10, paragraph 6(3).
1992 c. 13.	Further and Higher Education Act 1992.	In Schedule 8, paragraph 88.
1992 c. 37.	Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992.	In Schedule 9, paragraph 5(4).'.

No. 51, in page 24, line 31, column 3, at end insert—

'1994 c. 30.	Education Act 1994.	In Schedule 2, paragraph 6(4).'.

No. 52, in page 24, line 38, column 3, at end insert—

'1996 c. 56.	Education Act 1996.	In Schedule 37, paragraph 42 and, in paragraph 117(4), paragraph (b) and the word "and" immediately preceding it.'.

No. 53, in page 24, line 46, column 3, at end insert—

'2000 c. 21.	Learning and Skills Act 2000.	In Schedule 9, paragraph 10.'.

—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

6.31 pm

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill is a major milestone on the road towards race equality. It is the first significant amendment to the Race Relations Act in almost a quarter of a century. It is a necessary and important part of the legislative and administrative framework that the Government are creating to put public authorities where they should be: at the forefront, leading by example on race equality issues.

The Bill has its origins in the murder of the teenager Stephen Lawrence, a tragic and untimely death compounded by the failure of public services to respond to the needs of the victim and his family—a failure to provide a response that most would expect if faced with similar circumstances; indeed, a response most of us can take for granted.

The Stephen Lawrence inquiry report recommended that race relations legislation should apply to the police and that chief officers of police should be made vicariously liable for the actions of their officers. The Government accepted that recommendation and, in doing so, promised to extend the law not only to the police, but to other public authorities. That approach is consistent with the inquiry's finding that the problem of inequality in public authorities and of inequality in their provision of services to the public is not confined to the police. It is a problem in many other public institutions. We as a community and society must address that.

The Bill, which today we will send back to another place, will outlaw discrimination in public functions, with very limited and justifiable exceptions. Moreover, it will place a duty on specified public authorities to promote race equality—to avoid discrimination before it occurs.

The House should be particularly proud of the Bill. In it, we are sending a clear message to public authorities about the standards that we expect of them—standards that are being given the full force of the law as recommended by the inquiry. We are saying that public authorities must treat all British citizens equally, regardless of their race or the colour of their skin. Many ethnic minorities are proud to describe themselves as black British, Asian British, Chinese British or just plain British.

The Government want equal treatment for ethnic minorities to be reflected in employment practices, in policy development and in the implementation and provision of services. We as a nation cannot afford to waste talent. We need all our communities to be able to realise their potential free from bigotry, racial prejudice or

downright ignorance. That will help to achieve the goal, building a strong inclusive society and a successful multiracial society.

The Bill has been greatly improved during its passage through the House and, indeed, through another place. Government commitments in another place have been delivered in the Commons. We introduced many amendments that have been accepted by the House through constructive and helpful scrutiny. We have included indirect discrimination in the Bill; defined public authorities widely for the purpose of outlawing discrimination; and provided for a positive duty for public authorities to promote race equality.

The contribution of hon. Members throughout the House to the work in Committee deserves particular mention. I want to take the opportunity to pay particular tribute to the constructive approach of the representatives of both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative party. Without tempting fate, I think that we had a model Committee. I am grateful to the hon. Members for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for their contributions. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, for his contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig)—the Whip on the Committee—and the members of the Committee themselves, together with those who chaired it.

I do not normally name officials who deal with Bills, particularly controversial Bills—they might not thank me for it—but the Bill has had widespread support in the House. Callton Young and his team of officials deserve special thanks for the tremendous job they have done in preparing the Bill. The benefits of the Bill will be benefits that their efforts have brought about.

The consideration of the Bill by this House means that it should go back to another place in good shape. I, for one, look forward to seeing its effects when we get it into law, ensuring that we create the successful multiracial society that the House wants: then we can all look back and feel proud that we have been associated with the Bill. I commend it to the House.

6.36

Mr. Lidington: I unreservedly support the Bill's objectives and hope that it will in practice have the beneficial impact that the Government believe it will.

It is important that, when we consider the Bill's impact, we are prepared to remind ourselves of two things. First, it is not just through Acts of Parliament, legislation, rules and regulations that we will build a successful multiracial society. As I said on Second Reading, legislation has a part to play. As one looks at the current state of the law, it is difficult to argue, if one believes that there should be laws against racial discrimination, that we should have a law that includes the private sector and part of the public sector, but excludes an ill-defined, indeterminate part of the public sector in the way that the 1976 Act does. However, it is in the acts, the decisions, the growing together of individuals, families and communities throughout this country that we will see the creation of a tolerant society that accepts people of different ethnic backgrounds and that appreciates the contribution that people of different ethnic communities bring.

Secondly, we need to be aware, when we think about the Bill's impact and consider how future Ministers should implement the powers that it gives them, of the complexity of community relations. Last week's report from the Office for Standards in Education reminded us of that. It pointed out, rightly, the under-achievement of far too many black boys in schools, but it pointed out, too, that pupils from other ethnic minorities, particularly from some of the British Asian minorities, are achieving very high standards, securing good results at public examinations and good places at universities and colleges. We need to look at those problems in all their complexity. So much will depend on how the legislation is enforced and interpreted.

On Second Reading and in Committee we spent a great deal of time debating the Bill's impact on the police. More than once I voiced the concerns that had been expressed to me by serving police officers that the Bill could, albeit unintentionally, inhibit their ability to deal effectively with crime, especially street crime. In London, where many police forces have stopped using their powers to stop and search, there has been a significant rise in street crime in the past 12 months.

During our earlier proceedings, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), repeatedly assured me that there was no reason for responsible police officers to be fearful. The Government's consistent view has been that, provided that a police officer complies with the requirements of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and that any deployment of officers or any targeting of particular crimes or particular villains could be justified objectively in terms of preventing or reducing crime, there should be no problems under race relations legislation. I welcome those assurances, and provided that they are borne out in reality once the Bill is on the statute book, I promise the Minister that I will be the first to cheer.

We have a real problem of mistrust of our police among far too many young British blacks and Asians. If the Bill will help to ease that tension and build confidence and trust, it will be welcome. Another real problem is that police officers in London and elsewhere feel that they are under enormous pressure, with near-impossible expectations being laid upon them. I pay tribute to the representative organisations—the Police Federation, the Police Superintendents Association of England and Wales and the Association of Chief Police Officers—for the way in which they have sought to work with Ministers on the detail of the legislation. They have given a great deal of thought to how they can change and develop best practice within the police service so that they can effectively fight and reduce crime and, at the same time, help to rebuild trust and confidence in their service among young people from ethnic communities, as that is sorely needed.

Earlier in the debate, I expressed my concerns that we should avoid a culture of litigation and compensation and I was grateful for the assurances, particularly from the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, that the Government would consult closely with affected organisations before making specific proposals on the enforcement of the general duty.

Hon. Members from all three parties who have participated in debates on the Bill have found them constructive and good-tempered. There will be occasions when we shall continue to disagree as we approach the subject from different political and philosophical perspectives, but I believe that we are united in our

[Mr. Lidington]

commitment to build a successful multiracial society in the United Kingdom. I remain an optimist about our chances of doing just that.

The Bill was triggered by Sir William Macpherson's report into the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the appalling failure of the investigation into that crime. In the past two years, there has been a great deal of at times ill-tempered debate about race relations, policing and crime. I was heartened when I saw this week's edition of *The Voice*. I confess that it is not always my regular reading, nor is it probably a publication that looks for compliments from Conservative spokesmen. However, I felt that the editorial, in accepting that young black men are responsible for a great deal of street robbery in London, just as young white men are responsible for most violence that does not involve robbery and middle-class white men tend to be responsible for most fraud, took the debate about the relationship between race relations, policing and crime onto a different, more mature level, from which together, as a community, we can address the issues seriously.

I wish the Bill well. I hope that the fears that I have expressed during our debates are misplaced and I look forward to seeing what transpires when it reaches the statute book.

6.46 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: Like the Minister and the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) I am pleased and proud to be part of the process of bringing the Bill very near to becoming legislation. I did not want to interrupt the Minister, but if he has time at the end of the debate, perhaps he will let us know when he anticipates orders will be laid to bring the Bill into force, provided that it gets through the other place and receives Royal Assent in November. That is a matter for the Government and I would encourage the Minister—and through him, the Home Secretary—to lay the orders so that the Bill comes into force this year, for reasons that I shall turn to in a moment.

As the Minister said, the Bill does two hugely important things. It has taken nearly 25 years for the original and very worthwhile race relations legislation, introduced by the then Labour Government, to be updated in this way. It takes the duty not to discriminate across the public sector and adds the duty that we discussed earlier to take proactive steps to promote good race relations and equality of opportunity and eliminate unlawful racial discrimination. Those are hugely important measures.

I share the Minister's view that it would be a model Bill for people who study politics. It had goodwill from the beginning although, unusually, it started in the House of Lords. There were good, robust debates. Many amendments were tabled—there were defeats and successes—and it was amended significantly in both Houses, resulting in a Bill that we are all much more satisfied with than we were at the beginning. Yet, as the Minister said, it has received almost no coverage in the parliamentary press or elsewhere.

Like others present in the Chamber, I am a London Member. I represent a constituency in south-east London. I trained there as a youth leader and have lived in south London since my student days. The Bill matters a lot to mixed-race communities such as ours which comprise all sorts of different backgrounds, cultures, faiths and traditions. It matters a lot that they can trust the public services and that the public services can trust them. If we are to have a society in which black and Asian people and people of different faiths, colours, creeds and backgrounds can become Members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers, leaders of industry, head teachers of schools, chancellors of universities and Speakers of the House of Commons, we must start by inculcating and providing the proper public authority responsibilities that are in the Bill.

I will not dwell on the one or two disputes that remain between ourselves and the Government, but we hope that some of those will be taken up. A set of equality issues is still to be taken on, including religious equality issues about which some faiths understandably have strong feelings. There is more work to be done. I am not complacent, and I know that the Minister is not complacent. I wish to thank the Minister and his colleagues, particularly the team of civil servants which I know included somebody seconded from another Department to lead the team. I also pay tribute to colleagues, both here and at the other end of the building, who have worked hard.

Expressly, I want to pay tribute to Doreen and Neville Lawrence, who made their tragedy something that will leave a legacy that will probably be more valuable than they could ever have imagined. Those who have been privileged to meet them, and those of us who sat in the inquiry, know that the Bill is probably one of the most valuable things that that terrible trauma in Eltham can have produced—legislation to make our society a fairer and less discriminatory place.

I pay tribute to the inquiry, to Sir William Macpherson and to his assessors, who were there day after day and, in the end, were clear about what needed to be done. I pay tribute to the Commission for Racial Equality, which keeps us up to the mark all the time; I wish its new chief executive and director well. I thank people such as Richard Jarman and Barbara Cohen, who serve us well. I pay tribute also to a researcher of mine, Simon Hunt, who has now left for better-paid employment at the Greater London Authority. He did all the work on this Bill until, literally, a couple of weeks ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith)—who has just arrived—served with me on the Committee. He would have been with me today had travel been easier, and I thank him for his support.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman asked me about the commencement order. We must undertake consultation in relation to the immigration function. We are anxious to move on, but the consultation will need time. All I can say to him, in the words of Martin Luther King, is "How long? Not long."

Mr. Hughes: That is an assurance and I know of the Government's commitment to get this Bill on to the statute book.

In one of the idle moments that we occasionally have in this place, I checked some figures. We have had 43 Government Bills in this Session, 28 of which have so far been enacted. We have had 12 Home Office Bills;

four have been enacted, one withdrawn and one defeated. There are six still to finish, including this one. In the end, this one may be as significant as any of the others. I hope that, either this year or very early next year, this Bill will become law. We can then start as we mean to go on in a much fairer Britain for people of all backgrounds. That would be a tribute to Stephen Lawrence.

6.53 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I join all colleagues in welcoming a momentous leap forward in protection from race discrimination. The Bill embodies the implementation of the Government's commitment in response to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry to extend the Race Relations Act 1976. I am particularly pleased because it underpins the right of all British citizens to receive not just equal treatment, but fairer access to services.

In a diverse society—particularly in constituencies such as mine—good race relations means protecting the civil liberties of all members of society. This is highlighted by the fluid nature of the situation regarding ethnic minorities, and by the term itself. After all, in Tower Hamlets we must consider that, in some areas, the ethnic minority is the white community. That shows clearly that it is in the interests of all British people, black and white, to ensure that we have robust legislation protecting us all from racial discrimination.

Having said that, my constituency clearly illustrates that black and Asian people suffer the greatest burden of direct and indirect discrimination. The most important provisions of the Bill are, first, to make it unlawful for public authorities to discriminate on grounds of race and, secondly, to impose a duty to promote equality on public authorities. Taken together, those measures represent a major breakthrough in anti-discrimination legislation on which the Government must be congratulated.

I particularly want to thank the Government for their acceptance that tackling indirect and institutional discrimination is critical if the Bill is to offer serious protection. There has been a controversial debate in Britain about the validity of this approach and about tackling institutional racism. People have asked where we will end up if we start here. They say that it may be a slippery slope. I hope that, if we start here, we will end up with a society where the colour of a person's skin does not determine his opportunity or treatment under the law.

That strikes a chord with me personally, as my family experience has been shaped by indirect discrimination. My father was arrested and imprisoned because, as a black student in the American south, he asked for equal treatment with his white peers. He was brought up in a place where the local authority and the Government routinely discriminated institutionally against black people. Recently, the judge who sentenced my father—now 98 years old—wrote to President Clinton saying that his judgment in my father's case had been coloured by race. How often do black people get an opportunity—after waiting 40 years, it has to be said—to see a judge put in writing to the head of state that his judgment was coloured by race? It does not happen very often. Forty years is a long time to wait for a Government to recognise the evils of institutional racism.

In this country, we have been waiting for just under a quarter of a century to strengthen the Race Relations Act 1976 and to achieve the racial equality that is the Act's central aim. The CRE carried out reviews of the 1976 Act in 1985 and 1992, but its recommendations were ignored by the then Conservative Government. I am pleased to hear how positively the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), spoke about the Bill.

In contrast, the Labour Government were quick to progress positive race relations as soon as we were elected. We did that in the first instance by setting up the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, which reported in February 1999. One of the key recommendations was that the

> full force of the race relations legislation should apply to all police officers and that chief officers of police should be made vicariously liable for the acts and omissions of their officers relevant to that legislation.

Following the inquiry, the Home Secretary promised to introduce legislation to bring authorities, including the police, within the scope of the Act. True to his word—as ever—here it is.

Having said how much I welcome the Bill, I wish to point out my concern about enforcement. How will the duty to promote equality be enforced? Could the Minister elaborate? Obviously, the CRE's role will be crucial in terms of guidance to organisations, issuing codes of practice, enforcing compliance and, if necessary, taking authorities to court. As the CRE has pointed out, compliance with the duty to promote equality can be audited by other means; for example, by Ofsted or by Her Majesty's inspectorates of schools and of prisons. What types of audit does the Minister envisage? Will they take place annually?

My other concern is about religious discrimination. I was reminded of this by my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy). He has had to leave because of an important constituency meeting, but he is naturally concerned about this debate as he is approximately the same age as Stephen Lawrence would be, were he still alive. Under the 1976 Act, Sikhs and Jews are protected, but Muslims are not. Although that has been the result of case law and interpretation rather than a specific provision in the Act, it has given offence to many Muslims and to anyone who cannot accept religious discrimination. I commend the work of Lord Ahmed on the subject, and the extra protection that the Human Rights Act, which took effect on 2 October, offers. Will the Minister tell us whether further legislation on religious discrimination is being considered?

I hope that the Minister will consider the seriousness of the discrimination that British Muslims suffer. I know that he is aware of that, and that it is difficult to untangle—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but she is straying outside the bounds of the Bill. On Third Reading, she must confine her remarks to the content of the Bill.

Ms King: Thank you for that guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of which I am in need. One day, I shall understand all the various rules about what can be said and when it can be said.

The Bill accepts that many strands contribute to the poverty of British Muslims. They are more than four times more likely than white households to live in poverty. More than 60 per cent. fall below the poverty line;

[Ms King]

for white families, the figure is 16 per cent. Given all the contributory strands, such as education and employment, will the Minister let me know the Government's thinking on improving that position if it is not covered by the Bill?

No debate on the issue would be complete without a tribute to Doreen and Neville Lawrence. We have heard many tributes from both sides of the House. It is fitting that the Government have changed the race relations legislation in this country largely as a result of the enormous dedication and commitment that the Lawrences have shown. The Bill is truly a fitting memorial to their son, Stephen.

7.2 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I apologise for not being present for the Minister's opening speech. Travel from Humberside has not been easy today.

I welcome the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on behalf of the Conservative party. I listened with interest to the words of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), and I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King).

Stephen Lawrence would have been 26, were he still alive. I congratulate the Government on setting up an inquiry into his death. Richard Stone, one of the assessors, made a comment that influenced me enormously. He said that we should not expect the victims to overcome injustice; those who have greater influence or power, or are more established members of the community, are responsible for putting things right.

I accept that responsibility, and I shall continue to pursue it until the colour of my skin is as important as the colour of my eyes or my hair. People may notice it, but it tells no more about me. I may have no hair left soon, so only the colour of my eyes and that of my skin will remain.

The Bill is important. However, it is more important that people act in the spirit of the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Bill, which amends it. I welcome the fact that the police accept that the responsibility will fall vicariously on chief officers' shoulders, but that by itself is not enough. Chief officers have senior officers, middle-ranking officers, managers, sergeants and others beneath them. A high proportion of police officers already do their best to treat people fairly and equitably. I believe that, in five years, the police will be able to look back to this year and appreciate the progress that they have made since the Bill was enacted. They can look back now at the progress that they have made in the past five years. Of those two statements, one is true and one will be true.

Much baggage hangs over the police, and not only the Metropolitan police. I was pleased that the inspector of police and the Minister were present at the first meeting of the Black Police Association in Birmingham. At the meeting, it was clear that some senior officers, who had ethnic minority officers with them, treated them as a normal part of the police service. I suspect that others believed that, while they were not undergoing a charade, they were playing a role to show, "We're all equal now." Yet I do not believe that that is true in all parts of all police services in this country. It is true of the majority, and of a growing number of parts of the police service, but it is not generally true.

Let us consider three examples in the Metropolitan police area. I am glad that the police resolved the matter with Detective Inspector David Michael without having to go through a tribunal. That was wise of both sides. In such a case, the relevant officer might have done better in monetary terms by fighting it out, and I have no doubt that the Metropolitan police could have made various comments in an open forum. They wisely came together. That could apply to outstanding cases when the Bill changes the current Act.

Without going into the details or the merits of the different claims and hearings in relation to Sergeant Gurpal Virdi, or those that may arise in relation to Police Constable Manmohan Sandhu, it would be wise for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to look through the outstanding cases and ascertain the number that can be resolved by agreement with the relevant officers or employees.

Perhaps the Minister will say that, had I been present earlier, I would have heard his comments about people outside the police rather than the police dealing with their employees. I accept that. However, the police should be able to draw a line on both outside and inside complaints and, when possible, to resolve them by agreement. I believe that, in the case of former Sergeant Gurpal Virdi, and other cases around the country, it would be possible to reach a satisfactory, honourable agreement, which could sweep away much of the past and allow people to move forward without tying up police time and action.

I believe that I was chosen to represent Worthing, West partly because, when asked what was effectively a race question, I gave the sort of promise that I made at the beginning of my speech. I outlined my determination as a Member of Parliament to try to help to put matters right. When people accuse the Conservative party of being racist, I would say that, in one of the safer Conservative seats—one of the whiter constituencies, if I may put it that way—people want to embrace a modern Britain and the sort of inclusiveness that is shown by an extended story that I shall abbreviate.

In one of Dorothy Sayers' essays, a man whom she calls Budgery is asked, "Are you English?" He replies, "Yes, of course." He is then asked, "Did your ancestors arrive with William the Conqueror?" "Oh no" he replies, "There were Budgerys here before Billy the Conk. But of course, there is some Norman blood in us, and Sir Gilbert brought back a Saracen wife from the third crusade, and so-and-so married a daughter of Pocohontas, and Robert Budgery was black. He came from south America—no one knew who his mother was. The Cornish branch was, of course, Spanish—the Armada, you know." It goes on. The character unrolls Britain's history as he introduces more people. He concludes, "I am of course English, although my mother's father was perhaps Irish and my mother's mother was Scottish." People can accept that sort of inclusiveness with pride.

When people talk about the cricket test, I do not understand why I cannot cheer for the Irish because of my Irish ancestry, just as my wife may cheer the English because her great uncle captained England before the first world war, even though she was born in Scotland. Such mixtures will become increasingly common and need to be made increasingly open.

In my constituency, a young mother told me that she wanted to move to an area where there were more mixed-race children in school because she did not want

her child to feel different. Her husband said that he would prefer to move closer to the police station. He explained that, as he was arrested so often, such a move would save journey time. He is black, and he was stopped three times in two days on suspicion of excess alcohol. The roadside test and the two tests in the police station showed that he was teetotal. One begins to wonder what police sergeants, inspectors and superintendents are doing.

We are talking about sensible standards, which no doubt could have been set in the past. I think that we all now treat people in the spirit of the legislation that has been introduced, and I think that the police will too. I commend the Bill and welcome the response of the police to it. I do not underestimate the responsibilities that chief officers of police have taken on for themselves.

7.10 pm

Mr. Mike O'Brien: With the leave of the House, I should say a few words in response to a couple of points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), who asked about enforcement of the Bill. The Bill will empower the Commission for Racial Equality to issue a compliance notice to any public authority that fails to fulfil a specific duty imposed by order to promote race equality. If necessary, the CRE could seek a court order to enforce that provision. Audit bodies such as the Audit Commission would also be subject to the duty to promote race equality. They will be able to report on the issue, and that will help to underpin the duty.

I hope shortly to publish the results of research undertaken by Derby university on the extent of religious discrimination and the results of other research into legal issues, which may involve considering possible legislative options. I can take the matter no further than that now.

I join all colleagues in paying tribute to Doreen and Neville Lawrence. The death of Stephen Lawrence was a tragedy, but it has resulted in changes to the law. I hope that it will make this country a better place for us all, no matter what our race or background.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

PETITION

2001 Census (Wales)

7.11 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I wish to present a petition of the residents of Wales and the other countries in the United Kingdom. It declares that the census forms for 2001 do not allow those who wish to describe themselves as Welsh to do so; nor do they allow for Welsh speakers resident outside Wales to state that they can speak the language. That would render the census a wasteful and pointless exercise. The petition is presented in both Welsh and English and has 9,455 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure that these forms be amended to remedy these flaws.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

2001 Census (Wales)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

7.13 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): First, let me assure the Minister and everyone else present that, after a marathon nine-hour journey from west Wales, I do not intend to delay the House too long. It is to be welcomed, however, that we have a little time to debate the issue.

I wish to discuss some aspects of the census to be undertaken in Wales next year, and particularly the lack of the Welsh tick box, as it is known, on the census forms. I wish to discuss also some issues that relate to the Welsh language aspect of the census, which are somewhat less important at present.

About two minutes ago I presented a petition on behalf of about 9,500 residents of Wales and of beyond Wales. These are all people who wished to state that they wanted a Welsh tick box on the census form next year. That demand became apparent over the summer months—perhaps the Government thought that it would be a summer flash flood or storm. However, since the emergence of unhappiness in Wales about the format of the census form, the campaign has grown in status as support has grown. It is an issue that many people in Wales are concerned about for the future.

It may be useful if I outline briefly how we got ourselves into this position. I understand that planning for the census began at least four years ago—it probably began much earlier than that. The White Paper that set out some of the Government's proposals for the census was published in March 1999. That was followed by an exercise in Wales at least, in parts of the counties of Ceredigion and Gwynedd in April 1999. That was before I became the Member for Ceredigion and before I had any representative role in the county.

It is important to emphasise that all those events took place before devolution and before the National Assembly for Wales was established. Most of the consultation on the census format was therefore undertaken with the Welsh Office rather than the Welsh Assembly. That might be one reason why some disquiet has arisen within Wales since then.

In 1991, basically the same question was asked throughout England, Scotland and Wales. At that time, many people thought that it was an adequate catch-all to cater for the situation within those countries. We did not have devolution. However, it is worth noting that in 1991, for the first time, the census form included a question about Irish people, and people of Irish descent within Wales. I have no doubt that that was an important step forward for the delivery of services to Irish people, particularly in some English cities. That begged the question of the position of Scottish people, Welsh people, or whatever.

I do not see this matter as an ethnic issue. It is one of national identity. I note that the National Statistician, Len Cook, has recognised the principle. In his statement last Wednesday, when he announced several concessions on this matter, he said:

> We are explicitly recognising the diversity of those who identify themselves as Welsh as having other ethnic backgrounds.

That is important. I would like the census to discover how many of those in, for example, the Somali community in Cardiff or the Chinese community in Bangor feel themselves also to be Welsh. That sentiment is part of the emerging Welsh nation and part of the emerging pride, self-determination and self-confidence that is now abroad and burgeoning in Wales with the National Assembly for Wales. Some of that self-confidence has taken a knock with the announcement of the format of the census forms and the lack of ability for people in Wales to tick a simple box to say that they are Welsh. There is no provision either for a box that they can use to state what other background they may have. That has caused some concern.

In 1991, before devolution and before we started to discuss some of these matters, the term "British" may have seemed to be adequate. However, it is important that we recognise what the term means now. I think that it designates a mostly white ethnic background. Many people in the United Kingdom do not see it as a useful term. The Runnymede Trust report of about two weeks ago raised the question of how "British" is used as a term. What was tolerable 10 years ago may not suit as a catch-all now.

Once the Scottish Parliament decided that in Scotland the first question on the relevant part of the census would be, "Are you Scottish?", that begged the question what would happen in Wales and other parts of the United Kingdom. It would be interesting if the Minister were to tell us—it would take a long history lesson and I am sure that we do not want that and do not have time for it—when Britain became England and Wales only. When was it that we could use the term "British" for the residents of England and Wales? That is de facto what we are doing now throughout the United Kingdom with the census. The residents of Scotland have the ability to describe themselves as Scottish and Irish people, wherever they are in the United Kingdom, have the ability to describe themselves as Irish. All other ethnic groups can use the term that they find most appropriate.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): I know that the hon. Gentleman would not want to mislead the House. I think that on page 15 of the census form there is a question about place of birth. People can indicate whether it is England, Scotland, Ireland or Wales. After that, there is a question about ethnicity—for example, whether one is British, Irish, white, black, African, Asian or whatever. There is also the facility to write Dutch, German, French, Welsh or whatever. The form does not deny anyone. A tick box is not required. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is so unsure of his Welshness that he requires a tick box to affirm it.

Mr. Thomas: I am well aware of what the form says: I have it in front of me. I shall deal with the latter part of the hon. Gentleman's argument later, if he will be patience, as I am coming to that issue. However, I shall make a general point. The hon. Gentleman represents the constituency with the highest proportion of people born in Wales and still resident there—more than 95 per cent. I represent the constituency with the highest proportion of people born outside Wales but now resident there. Where people were born is no indication of where they identify with, and it is important to allow people to identify with Wales on the census form whether they were born outside

or inside Wales, and whether they speak Welsh or not. The hon. Gentleman should realise that, but, in a second, I shall address the point about whether the tick box is the best way to do that.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Thomas: No, I shall not take any further interventions for the moment, as I want to pursue my argument.

Following the discussions, and especially in the light of what occurred in Scotland, the Office for National Statistics should have realised what was happening and perhaps returned to the National Assembly to see whether it wanted to make a further amendment to the census form.

A cynical definition of "British" is that it is what those in England call people from Scotland and Wales when they win an Olympic gold medal.

Mr. Smith: You seem to be saying that Welshness is a question of identification. The logic of your argument is that, if someone from England comes to live in Wales and identifies with Wales, he may be regarded as Welsh. If that is your argument, it is against the whole history of your party, which has been based on an anti-English sentiment. I can give an example. During the second world war, child evacuees came to Wales. Your party opposed that on the basis that it would be one of the greatest threats—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman should know the courtesies of the House. He is not referring to the Chair: he is referring to an hon. Member.

Mr. Thomas: The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) does not half talk rubbish sometimes.

Mr. Smith *rose—*

Mr. Thomas: If that is the quality of the hon. Gentleman's interventions, I do not want to give way to him.

I and many people in Wales cannot accept that, post the decision on the format of the census form, the term "British" can be used for Wales and England only. Many people accept that "British" refers to the people who live in all these islands.

Mr. Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Thomas: No, I have already told the hon. Gentleman that I will not give way.

It is a moot point whether "British" can refer only to Wales and England given the way in which the census form has been put together. When the form appeared on the website back in July, it sparked a reaction in Wales and a little uproar began which, it would be fair to say, was led initially by the *Western Mail*. It gave this matter much attention, but pretty soon other parts of the media and Members of the House took it up. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman's colleague, the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan), ran her own petition in her constituency asking for the census form to be amended. I launched the petition that I presented to the House tonight at the National Eisteddfod in Llanelli. Within a week it had 5,000 signatures, and tonight it had almost 10,000.

I have also received letters of support from more than 100 community councils in Wales, which are the forum of local debate and democracy in Wales. As I was trying to make my way to the House tonight, I heard about the flood problems along the Usk, Wye and Severn valleys—all border areas with England. I was struck by how many of the community councils in those areas had written to say that they would like the census form to have a tick box to record whether people are Welsh or not.

Ten of the county councils in Wales have sent me letters of support. More importantly, the Welsh Local Government Association has said that the census form should be amended, as has the Commission for Racial Equality in Wales and the Welsh Language Board.

Mr. Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Thomas: Why not, if the hon. Gentleman would like to have another go.

Mr. Smith: I do not want to have another go. Through Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to ask whether you deny the history that I outlined. Secondly, what is your definition of Welshness?

Mr. Thomas: I do not know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether you have a definition of Welshness. For the benefit of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent, my definition of Welshness is anyone who lives or works in Wales and who wants to be Welsh. It is as simple as that. The hon. Gentleman's other comments were not worthy of his so-called socialist background.

I shall press on, because I am sure that many hon. Members want to sleep after their hard work getting here today. I ask the Minister to consider the deep hurt that was felt by many in Wales because the Office for National Statistics had seemingly overlooked this aspect of Welsh public life. The Minister will note that I referred to the Welsh Local Government Association, the Commission for Racial Equality and the community councils and local authorities in Wales. They are the ones who will use the census forms, and they will evaluate the information gathered by the census to deliver better public services in Wales.

Usefully, the Under-Secretary of State for Wales made an announcement to the press today that every census form not filled in and returned from Wales would be a cost to Wales of £3,000 per person. That is a useful figure to play with, because, as the Economic Secretary to the Treasury may know, there is serious talk in Wales of a boycott of the census forms, and that still cannot be ruled out, despite the recent concessions.

We have one chance in 10 years to get this right. We want to maximise the number of people who fill in the census forms and get them back so that the national statistics present the best argument for Wales. To get it right we need to design census forms that are easy to fill in and which do not put people off. To answer the point made by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers), that is why tick boxes were designed. Any statistician will tell

[Mr. Thomas]

him—he is a scientist, so I suspect he already knows—that it is easier and better to gather information through a simple tick box method. Each time we ask people to write something in, we put up a small barrier. People may note that they could write in Welsh, but may put the form on the kitchen table and the next day forget, make a few ticks and send it off. That is why the announcement of a publicity campaign to encourage people to write in Welsh is an important step forward, and I welcome that concession.

The response from the Office for National Statistics was not as welcome as the hon. Member for Rhondda may think. It first tried to ignore the campaign in Wales, and then tried to belittle it, saying that it was unimportant. It went down the road that the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent wishes to go down. It then said that individuals could write "Welsh" in the "other" box if they so wished. Finally, last week, it accepted the point of principle. It accepted that it was wrong and that something needed to be done. So far, that something has been a local campaign in Wales to encourage people to write on the form that they are Welsh, and a second survey within the labour force survey that will be carried out at the same time.

Many people in Wales have told me that they told the Office for National Statistics, at least informally, that that amendment should have been made. I should like to bring a particular case to the Economic Secretary's attention. Following the exercise in Gwynedd, one of the people who was distributing the forms—an Englishman as it happens—told the local managers from the Office for National Statistics that people filling in the forms in Gwynedd had told him that they would like to see a "Welsh" tick box. Somehow that message did not get back. It got back much too late, possibly after the forms had been printed.

I believe that senior staff in Government organisations, such as the Welsh Language Board, may also have mentioned this matter informally, but it is not the board's role to deal with the ethnic question: it is concerned with the provision of the forms in both Welsh and English.

The whole business has added insult to injury in Wales. In response to the hon. Member for Rhondda, I would argue that the tick box, which is designed to achieve complete and accurate reporting, symbolically has equal status with the tick box in Scotland. Many people have a gut reaction to this issue. It is important that we recognise that statistics are not politically neutral: they are politically loaded. The unemployment statistics in the 1980s were massaged by the Conservative Government, and the present Labour Government want to change them. That is a clear sign of how statistics are used for political purposes. If we look at the history of European funding in Wales, it took the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales to get to the bottom of the statistical mess of that funding. In time, that led to the concession on the comprehensive spending review that was announced in the summer.

Without a proper set of statistics that everyone in Wales can use and be confident about, we are in danger of losing the political gain. This debate raged in Wales until last Wednesday when, in advance of my question to the Prime Minister, the subject of which was clear, a £1 million campaign in Wales was announced. There will be £0.5 million for publicity, which I welcome, as it will be the first time that any Government have encouraged people in Wales to write in to say that they are Welsh. There will also be £0.5 million for an identity survey in Wales, which can be taken as an extension of the labour force survey. Will the Minister confirm that my interpretation of the details is correct?

I understand that the survey will look at 3,000 households and will ask further questions about Welsh identity. I welcome the first concession, but have serious doubts about the second, which involves the problem of which figures we now believe. Some people will write on census forms in Welsh, some will follow the labour force survey and respond that they are Welsh. If they are asked that question, they may respond more easily. However, I am concerned that we will not get accurate figures and that we may get conflicting evidence. As a result, we will not know where we are or be sure about national identity in Wales for the next 10 years.

No doubt the Minister will say that I should welcome £1 million being spent in Wales on those matters. However, that money could have been saved if the census forms had been correct in the first place. We have to shout all the time in Wales for our voice to be heard. Last week, the BSE inquiry showed that the views of the Wales Office were ignored because its civil servants were junior to those in London. It seems as if we always have to shout to make a louder noise before we are heard. When we are heard, as we have been in the past few weeks, it is too late to make a fundamental change.

I shall conclude with one or two small points about the Welsh language aspect of the census. It may be too late this year, but certainly for 10 years' time and the future, will the Minister look again at why the census cannot measure the number of Welsh speakers outside Wales? A simple question could be put on the census form in England, Wales and Scotland.

In the days of digital television, when our Welsh language television channel S4C is no longer terrestrially bound to Wales, but is available in the House of Commons and throughout England, it would be useful if that television channel could know the extent of the market of Welsh speakers or Welsh learners outside Wales. On a practical front, that would be good for advertising and for initiatives such as the Welsh language school in London, which could make its case on the basis of firm statistical information. It would not be hard to add such a question to a census form in England and many people feel that, as the Welsh Language Act 1993 gives equal status to Welsh and English, it is a natural progression to ask people in England, many of whom have moved out of Wales, whether or not they speak Welsh, so that we could tailor and deliver some element of services in England to Welsh speakers, especially, for example, the Welsh language school in London.

May I put some direct questions to the Minister. On what date did the printing of the census forms begin? We are told that the forms cannot be amended as it would cost £2 million to pulp and reprint them which, I agree, would be a waste of paper. We are told that that cannot be done as the forms have already been printed. I have been unable to find out when printing began, but wonder whether it was after concerns were first raised and whether, therefore, a mistake was made.

Will the Minister confirm that the different treatment of Wales and Scotland meets the terms of the Human Rights Act 1998? That question has been asked an awful lot in Wales, so the Minister's confirmation would be useful. Will she outline the concessions announced last week by the Office for National Statistics, especially the meaning of the survey that is going to be carried out? Where and how will the survey be carried out and how will it identify Welsh identity? How will the Office for National Statistics treat the National Assembly for Wales as an independent body?

An alternative form is now available in Wales that can be downloaded from the internet and is exactly the same as the official form. It probably breaks all the copyright rules, but has been slightly amended to include a Welsh tick box. Will the Minister tell me and others in Wales whether that form would be ruled admissible if people were to choose to fill it in and send it back? Does she accept that the results of that question in the census will be flawed, however we look at it, as the question was not asked in quite the right way? What will happen in 2011? What are the Government's plans to ensure that this never happens again? Will the identity survey that will be carried out as part of the labour force survey next year be carried out again in future to measure progress?

About 150 years ago, as many Members will know, the "Encyclopaedia Britannica" said "For Wales, see England". There is a danger of the National Office for Statistics saying "For Welsh, see British (other)". Many people in Wales think that that is not good enough, and I would welcome an explanation from the Minister about how the Government will undertake to remedy the situation.

7.36 pm

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) on seeking and securing this important Adjournment debate, which addresses questions that need to be asked about the relationship of nations in the United Kingdom to devolution. He is right to say that Welsh identity is sometimes overlooked both in this country and abroad, and that we are lumped together with the English, the British or whoever.

Our debate is a useful step forward in helping to raise the concept of the identity of Welshness, which needs to be done, given general geo-political forces in this country. The Government did not make a mistake, as they did not draw up the census form. The Office for National Statistics did make a mistake—there are no ifs or buts about that. However, the hon. Gentleman and I differ over the way in which the situation was then tackled.

I sat with my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) on the Committee that dealt with the census, but this issue never came up, as one can see from *Hansard* and the general forms that were put on the Table in Committee—*[Interruption.]* I do not know why my hon. Friend the Member for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger) is laughing. Perhaps he should serve in Committee, then he would know a little about what we do.

The issue never came before the Committee. The Economic Secretary told us what the census involved, explained its general progress and so on. An issue arose concerning the development of health statistics, to which I shall return later. I made only a suggestion about the definition of illness in the form and the English-speaking areas of the south Wales valleys, where the hon. Member for Ceredigion and I come from—indeed, we are from the same valley. I said that definitions of illness as being sick, very sick and so on had no validity in the south Wales valleys. The way we measure states of health is that one is bad, or bad in bed, or bad in bed under the doctor. I said that the idea of being sick, very sick or terribly sick had no relevance, which illustrates a difference in vernacular speech and our general attitude.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion is right and his argument about a tick box is irrefutable. A mistake was made, but what do we do about that now? I do not like the way that mistake is being used as a political football.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the fact that I am a scientist. As I understand it, censuses create a framework for the development and administration of future policies, so it is necessary to get matters right. We want to know who is sick, what needs exist, who speaks Welsh, who does not speak Welsh, whether there is a reason for putting more money into the Welsh language or whether we are wasting money by throwing money at it, and whether it is declining in the population.

For those of us who want to save the Welsh language and who have been working for that for most of our political lives in various ways, particularly in local government, it is important to try and measure such things. However, people are running around for political and extreme nationalist reasons—I do not call the hon. Member for Ceredigion an extreme nationalist, but perhaps extreme bonkers—saying, "Don't fill the form in. There is no tick box. It is a flawed census." Even the hon. Gentleman used the expression.

Mr. Simon Thomas: The hon. Gentleman is going off at a tangent. May I make it clear to him and to the House that I have never called for anyone not to till in the census form?

Mr. Rogers: I did not say that; I said that there were extreme people saying so. I would not call the hon. Gentleman extreme. I would not call his party particularly extreme. It was not concerned about the tick box until another fringe party picked it up, forcing the hon. Gentleman and his party into a corner. It realised that somebody had taken its clothes, so it had to respond by developing the campaign.

I understand all that. It is no good being a Welsh nationalist party and suddenly finding that one's nationalist clothes have been taken, but that is the way of the world. The trouble is that the *Western Mail*, which calls itself the national newspaper of Wales, is backing the campaign in its editorials and its coverage of the matter.

The biggest problem of all is what will happen if people do not fill in the census form. In that case, it will indeed be a flawed census. People may put a line through whatever the hon. Gentleman and his friends object to, but for God's sake let them fill in the rest of the form. To create the idea that there is something wrong with the census is a ghastly mistake which could have profound consequences. I want to find out how many people speak Welsh, how many do not, and where the need is. If people flaw even that one page, it will be counter-productive.

I am very proud of being Welsh, as are other hon. Members who represent Welsh constituencies. We do not run around waving the dragon all the time, but in our

[Mr. Rogers]

own way all of us have worked for the benefit of our communities—the people who elect us and whom we represent. However, our patriotism is not based on resentment against another nation. That is the divide between those on the Government Benches, who love Wales and things Welsh, and certain members of the hon. Gentleman's party, who seem to have a resentment against the English—why, I do not know. Perhaps it is a personality disorder of his party, which is unfortunate. Some of my very best friends are members of his party—

Mr. Llew Smith: My hon. Friend should not stretch the case.

Mr. Rogers: I will not stretch it too far. I mentioned that the hon. Gentleman's party had been pushed into a corner. I understand, and perhaps the Minister can confirm, that the chairman of the Welsh Language Board when it was consulted about the document was the former Member of Parliament for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, who is now Lord Elis-Thomas and who presides over the Welsh Assembly. The ex-president of the hon. Gentleman's party—the big wheel in the party—was consulted, yet he is not the focus of any attack for not doing his job at that time.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. I know that he listened carefully to what I said, but he may have missed the part in which I stated clearly that the Welsh Language Board was consulted as a statutory consultee on the running of the census in both languages and on the question relating to the use of Welsh in Wales. The board did not see it as its job to comment on any other aspects. Nevertheless, I said that members of the board have told me informally that they told the Office for National Statistics that that should have been done.

Mr. Rogers: If that is the case, perhaps we are both right. That is a good way to conduct such a debate, in which we agree on so many points.

The hon. Gentleman is concerned that people should be able to state on the census form that they are Welsh, and that they should know where they come from and where they are going, which is a bigger problem. As I understand it, on the front of the form is a space for the address, so people can state where they live.

Mr. Thomas *rose—*

Mr. Rogers: No, I shall not give way again.

For the first time, a census form in Welsh and English will be delivered to every household. That has never happened before. Previously, if one wanted to fill in a form in Welsh, one had to ask for it. That is no longer the case, and I congratulate the Office for National Statistics on that. That is the first point. Let us be generous in our praise, as well as in our accusations.

Secondly, on the form people will fill in the address at which they live, so it will be possible to identify all those who live in Wales. The problem arises in respect of Welsh people who live in England, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out. That is not covered by the address, but a little further on in the form, there is a category dealing with place of birth. There are tick boxes for England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland and "other". Those are in the bottom left-hand corner on page 15, as I recall. People can indicate, for example, that they are Welsh-born and live in Newcastle or London. That is no problem.

The third question is about ethnicity. I suppose that that is where the tick box causing all the concern might have appeared. I am happy to say that I was born in Wales, I live in Wales, I represent Wales, but I am also British. I see no problem with that, but I accept that if people have a problem with it, they will feel aggrieved about the tick box.

Mr. Smith: Why?

Mr. Rogers: I do not know why. As I said earlier, I do not require a tick box to affirm my Welshness, but people can write that they are Welsh. They can tick "British" or not tick it, tick "Irish" or not tick it, and write in "Welsh" if they want to. There is a space to write it.

In the next column on page 15 there are important questions relating to the Welsh language. From the provision of the forms and throughout the questions on address, place of birth and ethnicity, there is every opportunity for people to affirm their Welshness, but such a fuss is being made about the fact that there is no specific little box in which to do so.

I accept the argument put forward by the hon. Member for Ceredigion that it was a mistake on the part of the Office for National Statistics not to have recognised the very fine sensitivity that exists in some Welsh people. I do not need a census form to affirm that I am Welsh, and I am sorry that the issue is being made such a political football. Next time around, there will be a box. In that sense, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the Office for National Statistics will not make the same mistake again.

7.49 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): My mother explained to me many years ago about our ethnicity—a difficult problem for one brought up in an Irish Catholic family in Grangetown, Cardiff. We did not speak Welsh—or English very well—and most people spoke with Irish accents. We had friends carrying splendid, traditional Welsh names such as Salvatore, Elgezebal and Marina. My mother explained that we were Welsh just as they were Welsh, but some other people were "real" Welsh and others "proper" Welsh. If my mother were still alive to design the form, she would include three tick boxes. We are all Welsh, just as the splendid Newport rugby team is. One might be surprised at the names of the players, but they feel Welsh when they play Bath, as they recently did, winning by a happy margin.

All of us were Welsh who felt Welsh, no matter our background or ancestry. The real Welsh were those from the valleys of south Wales who did not speak Welsh but had the shadow, the pattern and the music of the Welsh language in their English speech. The idioms and the cadence of the Welsh language was in them. The proper Welsh were those who had the great good fortune to be born speaking Welsh.

I agree with almost all that was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas). This sensitive

issue has stirred emotions, and my hon. Friend was right to say that it was brought to our attention by a party whose leader is domiciled in Newport, West. If the matter is a political football, it is not one that Plaid Cymru kicked off. It may seem minor, but it has touched a raw nerve. People have become concerned that their Welshness, their nationality and their love of Wales were being downgraded, given that Scotland is in the census.

When the hon. Member for Ceredigion mentioned something that happened 150 years ago, I thought that he was going to talk about the chartist riots in Newport, West, which we are celebrating this week. Some 21 martyrs gave their lives for what they called a noble cause, and people are proud that Welsh women and men, living in terrible conditions of cruelty and unfairness, rose against their oppressors—not, in the main, Welsh—knowing that they were likely to die in the cause. We want to mark that history, nobility and Welshness on the census form.

7.53 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) on securing the debate and—like several of my hon. Friends—on making a long journey to the House today.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the format and content of the form for the 2001 census in Wales were the product of detailed consultation over several years. The subject of tonight's debate was not raised until a fairly—indeed, very—late moment in that process. Not until the beginning of July was there any indication—despite informal indications referred to by the hon. Gentleman of which I am not aware—from the extensive consultation of any demand for the Welsh tick box as an option for answer to what is, in fact, an ethnicity question. The hon. Gentleman spent some time saying that he felt that this was less a matter of ethnicity than of nationality, and that is one of the several difficulties surrounding questions of this type.

We must be clear—the hon. Gentleman has made it clear in this debate, if not outside the House—that it is wrong to say that anyone who wishes to record himself or herself as Welsh cannot do so. On the contrary, anyone can write "Welsh" against the last category specified in the question.

Mr. Simon Thomas: The hon. Lady is correct, but when the issue was first raised in July, the Office for National Statistics was not clear as to whether it would count everyone who wrote that he or she was Welsh. As a result, a bone of contention has arisen.

Miss Johnson: Matters are now clear: the National Statistician has made it plain that anyone who writes that he or she is Welsh will be counted as such in analyses of the census in Wales.

The hon. Gentleman was fully briefed on the consultation exercise. The census questions in Wales have been subject to comprehensive public consultation and parliamentary scrutiny. Let me loiter for a moment over some of the dates contained within the consultation period. Consultation began in June 1998 when the United Kingdom census committee considered a paper including recommendations on the content of the 2001 census. The draft White Paper was published on 18 December 1998, but work was done before that. On 30 March 1999, the Welsh census user network group met, and that meeting was attended by representatives of the ONS, 22 Welsh local authorities, health authorities, national park authorities and other public sector services such as the police. The White Paper proposals were discussed, but issues were raised only in relation to the religion and income questions.

Several public roadshows were held. At a meeting in Cardiff, 46 representatives of the census user community included those from the councils of Caerphilly, Carmarthen, City of Swansea and Neath Port Talbot. The issue of ethnic group categories was not raised. On 22 April, a public roadshow meeting held at Mold was attended by a further 34 representatives, including those from Gwynedd council. On 25 April, a census rehearsal was held at 15,000 households. The hon. Gentleman smiles, having realised that that took place not just in Gwynedd but in Ceredigion. Contrary to what he said, the ONS was not made aware of any evidence of concern about the wording relating to ethnic group. If the matter was contentious in any way, it was not raised as a result of the extensive census rehearsal. We are not, I know, concerned only with the hon. Gentleman's constituency tonight, but about 25 per cent. of the total households there were involved in that exercise.

A further meeting was held last July with the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the output requirements. Again, the question was not raised. On 26 July 1999, there were discussions between several parties, including the Welsh Language Board, which was also involved in discussions held in January 2000. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman was not yet a Member of Parliament at that point, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) said, a notable member of the hon. Gentleman's party was then president of the Welsh Language Board, and, although his concentration may well have been focused on the Welsh language, he was in an ideal position to make any representations had this been a burning topic. So far as I am aware, no such representations were made.

The hon. Gentleman was elected to the House in February 2000. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda made clear, census regulations were laid before Parliament several months later—in June. The hon. Member for Ceredigion observed that, because people did not shout about these matters from Wales, the situation did not reflect what might be a sensitive issue for some there. I do not think that it would be regarded as such by all on the same basis; but let us assume that some Welsh representatives might well have wanted to shout about it—including, I have to say, the hon. Gentleman, who did not shout on 6 June when the census regulations were laid before the House.

Mr. Rogers: In fairness to the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas), and as a member of the Committee involved, let me say that two members of that Committee never saw the census form. We never saw that there was no tick box. We looked carefully at the *Hansard*,

[Mr. Rogers]

and at the documents submitted to the Committee. However, I support everything that the Minister has said so far.

Miss Johnson: I accept that that may well be so, although someone was clearly concerned about the need to find out what was there.

We must, I think, conclude that regular liaison meetings were indeed held with the Welsh Language Board, and that the statistical directorate of the National Assembly has been involved at all stages of the planning process. There was extensive local authority engagement with the Welsh census user network, which was consulted a number of times before the questions were finalised. As I have said, there were rehearsals.

Mr. Thomas: I appreciate what the Minister has said about the census consultee group, on which local authorities were represented, but why have local authorities suddenly woken up to the issue since then—so much so that their own body, the Welsh Local Government Association, has said that it wants the census forms to be changed? We should not accept, "Something went wrong in the consultation process."

Miss Johnson: I really cannot comment. We have undertaken an extensive consultation, and the fact is that the issue was not raised.

Options for answering the ethnicity question include a write-in box in which people can identify themselves as Welsh if they wish to do so. As the National Statistician announced last week, the Office for National Statistics has undertaken to organise a significant advertising campaign to publicise that option.

The National Statistician also announced a new study of Welsh identity. That brings me to the hon. Gentleman's point about the separate survey now being planned for 2001—the Welsh labour force survey. A survey is already in progress, but will be expanded following the Assembly's request for a "booster." The aim is to obtain additional data on Welsh identity, and the results will be used to refine and expand information gathered in the census from the write-in option.

Let me reassure the hon. Member for Ceredigion. The labour force survey is a large and well-established Government survey, providing key information on labour market and related topics. The expanded and enhanced version that will be carried out at about the time of the census is designed to provide additional estimates of aggregate labour market statistics for unitary authorities in Wales.

The extra information will consist of questions about Welsh identity and a range of other variables, and will be brought together with the census information at local level. The result will be an unprecedented amount of detail about Welsh identity in every part of Wales, and the National Statistician has undertaken to publish a special report based on the information. The Office for National Statistics responded properly to issues that emerged from the census rehearsal.

There was a demand for the census form to be made available in both Welsh and English to people throughout Wales. As a result, the form will for the first time be available in both languages to every household in Wales. It will be the biggest-ever print run of an official document in Welsh. There was a demand for a question asking respondents whether they could understand, speak, read or write the Welsh language. Such a question has been included in the census form.

Other measures have been taken to ensure the success of the census in Wales. A question on the country of birth will provide a tick box enabling people to indicate that they were born in Wales; my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda mentioned that issue. For the first time, a census manager has been appointed specifically for Wales, and is a Welsh speaker. Efforts are being made to recruit bilingual field staff in Welsh-speaking areas, and the public inquiry line will offer full support in the Welsh language. We have tried to accommodate the points made during the extensive consultation period and reflect them in a census that will, in many respects, be well-tailored to Wales.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion asked about the parliamentary process. The census is a devolved matter in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where the respective Registrars-General are responsible for holding the census. The Registrar-General for England and Wales, who wears another hat as the National Statistician, has responsibility for the census in those countries. The census is governed by the Census Act 1920, which requires draft Orders in Council to be laid before both Houses. Those orders were approved in the Commons on 2 February, and in the Lords on 16 February, after which the census regulations were laid. The lead time is long and the period from the start of the parliamentary process to the holding of the census also needs to be long because of the scale of the logistical exercise to be undertaken.

The time scales allow the Registrar-General to recruit census field staff, prescribe the detailed arrangements for the delivery and collection of forms and set out the actual questions to be asked on facsimile copies of the census forms. The regulations were laid before both Houses on 6 June, and came into force on 27 June. Both those statutory instruments could have been objected to by Members of Parliament or peers at any time, but such objections did not arise.

In Scotland, a parallel process was conducted through the Scottish Parliament. The census regulations in Scotland were made on 15 June—a couple of weeks before ours came into force—and the regulations were laid before the Scottish Parliament the following day. The decision to include a "Scottish" category in the census in Scotland was taken by the Scottish Executive. The demand for a Welsh tick box had still not arisen.

The census is the biggest peacetime civilian operation affecting the whole population. Years of planning are required. The process includes not only the forms, but the preparation of the systems for their scanning, processing and analysis; in addition, there are logistical issues and contracts for the haulage company to deliver millions of forms. A lengthy time scale is required for the whole process.

To make a considered change to the census form would require testing and an assessment of the effect on the choices open to all the major communities. The addition of a Welsh tick box now would require additional legislation and parliamentary time, and technical and logistical operations that have been in train for months

could not be changed now without considerable disruption and expense. We have now entered the phase where even minor changes in any aspect could disrupt the process and jeopardise the census as a whole—something I am sure the hon. Member for Ceredigion does not want.

The National Statistician has promised that the possibility of a Welsh tick box will be considered during the consultation process for any future census. In the meantime, I urge the people of Wales to complete their census forms in April 2001—if they wish, using the write-in option to register their Welsh identity. The census informs £3 billion of public spending in Wales each year and I do not believe the people of Wales will want to see any part of that substantial sum put at risk. Those who fail to participate in the census increase the possibility that Welsh people will lose out on resource allocation and, consequently, on the provision of community services. It is in the interests of all the people of Wales to fill in their census forms and to ensure that Wales counts.

For those concerned about the lack of a tick box, the message is a simple one: "Tell us that you're Welsh and we'll count you as Welsh." As I am sure the House agrees, that is the best course of action for the people of Wales.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nine minutes past Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 31 October 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

NEW WRITS

Ordered,

That Mr. Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough Constituency of Preston in the room of Audrey Wise, deceased.

That Mr. Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Burgh Constituency of Glasgow, Anniesland in the room of the right hon. Donald Dewar, deceased.—*[Mrs. Ann Taylor.]*

Ordered,

That Mr. Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough Constituency of West Bromwich, West in the room of the right hon. Betty Boothroyd, who since her election for the said Borough Constituency has accepted the office of Steward or Bailiff of Her Majesty's Three Chiltern Hundreds of Stoke, Desborough and Burnham in the County of Buckingham.—*[Mrs. Ann Taylor.]*

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 7 November.

ALLIANCE & LEICESTER GROUP TREASURY PLC (TRANSFER) (BILL) *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 7 November.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Housing Grant (Slough)

1. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): How much grant towards the cost of house purchase will be available individually for *(a)* nurses, *(b)* teachers and *(c)* police officers in Slough. [133301]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I am delighted that my hon. Friend is so keen to see the benefits of our new starter home initiative. Over the next three years, we will provide £250 million for this scheme to help key workers on modest incomes to buy their own homes in high-price, high-demand areas, and at the same time to help employers to address their recruitment needs. We are currently working up detailed proposals in the light of responses to the housing Green Paper. Full details of how the initiative will operate, including the groups of key workers who will be eligible and the areas likely to qualify, will be announced later this year.

Fiona Mactaggart: As my hon. Friend will surmise, I put both the list of key workers and my constituency into the question to demonstrate the powerful claim that we have for the funds. In my constituency, there are 50 teaching vacancies not covered by permanent staff, and more than 400 in nursing and midwifery. The situation in policing is slightly confused by the fact that we force police officers in the Thames valley into Slough. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the claims of constituencies such as mine to become sustainable communities and have key public service workers will have a high priority in the details of the scheme?

Mr. Raynsford: I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that the scheme was devised precisely to address the kinds of needs that she has identified. As she will be aware, however, the scheme will operate as a challenge fund. We will therefore look at the bids that are submitted in response to the detailed brief to which I have already referred. We will seek to get support for those schemes that give the best value for money and help the largest number of people in need in high-cost areas.

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): Can the Minister not see how unfair and illogical it is to single out certain categories of key workers and not others—for example, to exclude ancillary workers in the NHS and civilian police employees? Does not he understand that using taxpayers' money in that way will only fuel house-price inflation, and that it is the Government's failure to provide sufficient affordable housing, especially in the south-east, that is putting such pressure on recruitment in key public services? Is not that exacerbated by the Government's barmy plans to build millions of the wrong homes in the wrong places? Is not the home loans policy just another example of government by gimmick?

Mr. Raynsford: That question illustrates the mistake that Opposition Members make when they write their questions in advance. Had the hon. Gentleman listened to my answer, he would have heard me say that the precise categories of people who will benefit will depend on the bids. We are not limiting arbitrarily the categories of beneficiaries: we will look at the proposals to judge which would be most effective in meeting real needs, irrespective of the category of public-sector worker or key worker that is involved.

Our scheme is designed to address a real problem that the previous Government did nothing to attack while they were in office. Indeed, they presided over a period of unprecedented house-price inflation, followed by the disastrous slump of the early 1990s that caused record

repossessions and homelessness. We will take no lessons from Conservative Members when it comes to putting forward proper proposals to meet housing needs in this country.

Home Improvement Grants

2. **Mr. Ivan Henderson** (Harwich): If he will make a statement on the action that his Department has taken to assist poorer home owners to maintain and improve their homes through grants to local authorities for home improvement agencies. [133302]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The Government attach great importance to the work of home improvement agencies, the prime purpose of which is to help elderly and disabled people remain independent in their homes. On 24 July, we announced a significant increase in the grants available to local authorities to support agencies, increasing the total available from £6.7 million this year to £8.5 million in each of the next three years. Bids for this money are presently being invited.

Mr. Henderson: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. He will know that the Grasslands, Brooklands and Village neighbourhoods of the Jaywick area of my constituency have serious housing problems. Tendring district council has just completed a neighbourhood assessment study of that area, where other problems include a lack of proper roads and street lighting, and very poor drainage. Will my hon. Friend give very serious consideration to the findings of that study, and to the transport plan submitted by Essex county council? That plan is supported by Tendring district council and would permit further funds to be invested in the roads in that area.

Mr. Mullin: We will certainly give serious consideration to the plans put forward by Tendring district council. My hon. Friend has been assiduous in representing the interests of his constituents in Jaywick, where, as he knows, major infrastructure improvements are required. The Government are willing to help, but we need Tendring district council and Essex county council to give a clear lead. There is still some way to go in that regard.

I understand that my hon. Friend is meeting representatives of the councils and the Government office for the east of England on Friday. I hope that he will impress on them the need to come up with a detailed plan for the regeneration of Jaywick, and to give a clear idea of the resources that they are prepared to contribute.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): The Minister in the past has paid some attention to affairs in Northern Ireland and will be aware that, some years ago, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive went over to a means-tested system for housing grants. He will also know that, to put it mildly, that has not been an unmitigated success. Will he therefore keep in mind that any policy that he produces must also take account of the condition of houses, and that the amount of money per applicant should be strictly limited?

Mr. Mullin: I shall certainly keep those points in mind. I should tell the hon. Gentleman, however, that my interest was not in matters Irish, but in the British justice system.

Housing (South-east)

3. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What recent representations he has received from organisations concerning housing in the south-east. [133303]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): We received almost 900 representations on draft regional planning guidance for the south-east. We have also received 397 responses to our housing Green Paper from people and organisations based in London and the south-east. Responses to both consultations covered a wide range of housing issues and other matters.

Dr. Lewis: It is hardly surprising that the Government should have received so many representations about their appalling policy of bulldozing and covering in concrete areas of green belt in the south-east to try and make up for the mess that they have made in developing sensible housing strategies for those areas under Labour control. Why does not the Minister simply adopt the common-sense Conservative policy of giving local discretion to local authorities on such matters?

Mr. Raynsford: As the hon. Gentleman knows only too well, the previous Conservative Government approved unprecedented levels of development by private developers on greenfield sites all over the south-east. The legacy of that Government's failed policies have quite rightly generated public concern. That is why this Government have instituted a 60 per cent. target for brownfield development and introduced new planning policy guidance. PPG3 gives clear guidance on how we should aim for development in the cities first, concentrating on urban renaissance rather than on profligate building on greenfield sites, which was the record of the previous Conservative Government.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Does my hon. Friend agree that one reason for high house prices is the lack of suitable, appropriate and affordable housing? Does he agree that it is important to build housing that is close to where people work and not in areas where there is no work?

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend makes a valid point about the importance of the provision of affordable housing for people in need—a point that eludes the attention of the Conservative party—and of ensuring that new housing development is properly related to opportunities for employment, shopping, transport and all the other things that make decent communities. That is why we have introduced our new policies on planning, which are designed to create communities and to encourage urban renaissance. I am impressed by the efforts made by many local authorities, including that of my hon. Friend, to ensure that the opportunities for

sustainable urban development are used, rather than the profligate building on greenfield sites that was the record of the previous Conservative Government.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Can the Minister confirm that the Government's new planning procedures in PPG3 are intended to result in fewer houses being built on greenbelt land, that if those procedures were applied in Hertfordshire it would obviate the need to build 10,000 houses west of Stevenage on greenbelt land, and that senior counsel has advised that the Government's refusal to apply their own procedures in this case is illogical, irrational and contrary to the law?

Mr. Raynsford: The right hon. Gentleman, as has so often been the case in previous debates on this subject, is wrong. He will know that there is a distinction between greenbelt and greenfield land, although he clearly fails to note the proper distinction. He will be aware that the principle of sustainability requires an approach that reduces profligate use of greenfield land. That is one of the keystones of PPG3.

The right hon. Gentleman will also know that the local planning authority in his county considered these issues in great detail and came to its view—not the Government's view—that it was more sustainable to develop in one location near to transport links and existing employment than to have a huge range of new development spreading throughout the rural areas in his constituency. He may not agree, but that was the decision reached by the local authority in his area, and he is quite wrong to blame the Government for it.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Gravesham borough council and North British housing association for the provision of 51 high-quality but affordable rental homes in the centre of Gravesend? Is that not the way to provide much-needed affordable housing in the south-east, without eating into green belt and greenfield sites, as the previous Government obviously did?

Mr. Raynsford: I congratulate my hon. Friend on catching your eye, Mr. Speaker, because I was able to see this very development with him in Gravesend only last Friday. It is exactly as my hon. Friend describes it—a new development in an urban, town-centre area in the Thames Gateway, which enables us to meet housing needs while at the same time reducing pressure on the countryside. That is exactly the kind of development that is the hallmark of this Government's policies.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): Given what has been happening in the south-east over the past couple of days, the Minister's response is breathtakingly complacent. Will he acknowledge that when, after the floods two weeks ago, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Ministers wrote saying that action would be taken, it was reasonable for people in the south-east to think that part of that action would be to cut the number of houses that the Government want to build in the wrong places in the south-east? Will the Minister give the House an assurance on that? If he cannot do so, will he recognise that among the things washed away will be his reputation for competence?

Mr. Raynsford: The Opposition have once again got it wrong. The hon. Gentleman knows that after the floods that occurred two years ago, we took action—we prepared new guidance on planning in relation to flood plains, which was issued for consultation in the normal way this summer and on which there has been extensive consultation. The hon. Gentleman also knows that those proposals make it clear that we expect developments to avoid flood plains when properties could be at risk. That guidance, which is in the public domain, was issued by this Government. It is time that the hon. Gentleman and the Opposition stopped their silly sloganising on this subject and focused on the real question—how do we meet genuine housing needs in a sustainable manner and protect the countryside? That is what we are trying to do. Everyone knows that the Conservative Government had a disgraceful record—they allowed profligate development all over greenfield sites, including flood plains. I am sorry that he did not apologise for the previous Government's record.

Central Railway

4. **Mr. Philip Hammond** (Runnymede and Weybridge): If he will make a statement on the proposed Central Railway project and his Department's policy towards it. [133304]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The amount of freight moved by rail has grown steadily over the period of this Government. Our 10-year plan for transport reinforces our commitment to ensure that that growth continues.

Although we have received copies of Central Railway's consultation documents and seen some of its publicity material, it has not formally submitted details of its proposals. I understand that the company hopes to apply for an order under the Transport and Works Act 1992. Bearing that in mind, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the merits of the scheme at this stage.

Mr. Hammond: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I appreciate his difficulty in commenting on the merits of the scheme. However, is he aware of the effect of current legislation on my constituents? Although a loss-making company with, effectively, no assets can propose to build a multi-billion pound scheme, there is no requirement to bring that proposal forward for formal consideration within a specified period. In the meantime, my constituents are blighted: they are unable to sell their properties. Does not that offend the Secretary of State's sense of natural justice? If so, what does he propose to do about it?

Mr. Prescott: I have some sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's point, which I believe he made in an Adjournment debate, and which I read last week. I am happy to concede that most large infrastructure projects are affected, and that the problem is real. He suggested one or two solutions, but they did not fit well with our approach, which we believe can deal with the matter.

However, the difficulty is that we cannot do anything until an application is made and the applicant says what he wants to do.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Does my right hon. Friend accept that there is considerable support for the scheme in the north-west of England? It would take much freight off the roads and put it on the railways. Even in the north-west, however, there is considerable concern about trying to protect routes for that proposed railway, which could be used for other purposes, well into the future. Will he encourage Central Railway either to get on with the scheme or give it up?

Mr. Prescott: I am, of course, acting in a quasi-judicial capacity, and I have to wait until Central Railway makes its application. The concern about the problem of blight could, I hope, be dealt with by a code of practice, which we have tried to get companies to agree to. However, until Central Railway makes its application—it said that it would produce it several months ago, but still has not done so—I can only suggest that it should bring the scheme before the House. If that were done, there would be a vote. If the House voted to accept the proposal, we would have to deal with the situation, but if it rejected the proposal—it did so on the previous occasion—that would be the end of the matter.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): When the Secretary of State takes account of Central Railway's proposals, will he also please give a fair hearing to the arguments that have been advanced by Chiltern Railways, which said that the scheme is incompatible with the current level of passenger rail service in my constituency and neighbouring constituencies? It also said that the scheme would have the paradoxical effect of driving many rail passengers back into their cars.

Mr. Prescott: Frankly, I have a planning and judicial role and I cannot decide or even comment. When the House debated a different proposition from Central Railway, comments were made. I think that the hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot comment on his remarks.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the problem that faces the railway industry is a shortage of track capacity for the future? Would it not be a good idea to keep open all the options for the future, including possibilities such as Central Railway?

Mr. Prescott: I can go a bit further in the sense that the Strategic Rail Authority has an obligation, now that the regulator has reported on the financing of the railways. Basically, he will shortly present a report on the strategic framework, which includes the contribution to be made by freight railway systems and extra capacity. The regulator is considering that matter as well as the financing.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): When the Government consider the proposal, will the Deputy Prime Minister assure us that environmental considerations will be uppermost in their mind? Does he understand that, in my constituency, the properties of hundreds of people in the Byfleet and West Byfleet areas on the edge of the motorway are blighted because details of the proposal are included on local searches? Does he realise that it is an important issue, as is noise and the other environmental problems that affect so many individuals all the way along the M25? Their interests are really important, are they not?

Mr. Prescott: I agree and, of course, an environmental assessment will have to be made alongside the other matters to be considered.

Coastal Byelaws

5. **Mrs. Helen Brinton** (Peterborough): When he will introduce legislation to implement the recommendations of the review of byelaws for the coast, published in 1998. [133305]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): We are working towards developing legislative proposals. In the meantime, local authorities can use their existing powers to manage recreational activities on the coast. We have published a voluntary code of best and safe practice for leisure craft users, and we are exploring options for a voluntary boat registration and identification scheme.

Mrs. Brinton: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply. May I draw his attention, however, to recommendation 12, which clearly states the need to consolidate existing coastal byelaws? Furthermore, does he agree that all users of motorised craft, including jet skis, should be required to have third-party insurance and proof of competency, as they are on most inland waterways and, indeed, on all our roads?

Mr. Meacher: We have said that we will consolidate existing coastal byelaws. The proposed legislation, to which I referred, will certainly do so. The review proposes that local authorities should be given the power to require third-party insurance in various circumstances and we shall take that into account as we develop our plans. The review did not recommend proof of competency, but I assure my hon. Friend that we shall look at that when we develop our legislative proposals.

Rural Transport

6. **Sandra Gidley** (Romsey): What steps he is taking to improve rural transport. [133306]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): We have made an extra £175 million available to support the transport needs of rural communities. The 10-year plan for transport provides more, so that we can support more scheduled rural bus services, expand the rural bus challenge to support more innovative services and deliver up to 500 new community-based transport schemes in the next three years through the rural transport partnership fund.

Sandra Gidley: Does the Minister agree that it would be exceedingly helpful if he extended the fuel duty rebate to include all forms of community transport, to aid people

in villages who rely on the community bus? Also, should not more money be invested in research on liquid petroleum gas and its availability?

Mr. Meacher: The conclusion that we should draw from the fuel crisis is that we need to reduce our overdependence on oil and to speed the switch-away to alternative fuels and renewable sources of energy. To that extent, I agree with the hon. Lady. Of course, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will deal with that matter in the pre-Budget report and we shall soon return to the issue in the rural White Paper.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Is the Minister happy that, in Transport 2010, to which he has just referred, sufficient emphasis is given to the potential for rural rail lines, such as the Ivanhoe line through west Leicestershire, south Derbyshire and east Staffordshire? Does he know that Leicestershire county council feels that present funding regimes are unduly restrictive and that they prevent the recreation of passenger services on this mineral railway, thus contributing to our overall transport objectives?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend is right; the 10-year transport plan is certainly not confined to roads. We propose expenditure of just less than £60 billion on the rail system in addition; indeed, we should see a considerable increase in ridership and a doubling of the amount of freight carried by rail.

As to the rail line to which my hon. Friend referred, I am sure that the extra resources that we are making available over the next 10 years will open the possibility of investment in precisely that type of railway.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): The Chancellor made much of the £15 billion a year rural bus grant. However, will the Minister confirm that that modest amount is dwarfed by the extra costs faced by bus companies, such as the cost of the working time directive and higher fuel prices, and by the fact that shire counties have had their rural transport budgets cut by the Government?

Mr. Meacher: I entirely understand the point the hon. Gentleman makes, but I think that he is entirely wrong to suggest that the considerable expenditure that has gone into rural transport—£175 million—is swamped or dwarfed by what he refers to. VAT and duty on petrol now make up a lower proportion of the total price than in 1997. The UK has the lowest total tax burden in the European Union—far lower than the average. Foreign hauliers and others who operate abroad have to pay road tolls and are subject to higher VAT and corporation tax. When all those relevant factors are taken into account, the picture is very different from that suggested by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Does my right hon. Friend share the concern of my constituents, who recently heard that Stagecoach gave only six weeks' notice of the withdrawal of all their bus services to Abergavenny, Chepstow and Monmouth, in order to secure as much money as it could from local authorities through the rural bus initiative? Does he agree that that matter must be looked at, so that private operators such as Stagecoach, which exercise a monopoly, do not hold local authorities and the public to ransom in that way?

Mr. Meacher: I very much support what my hon. Friend says. Although the 10-year transport plan is about the expenditure of substantial increases of money—42 per cent. in real terms on the previous 10 years—it must also take into account the restrictive practices or monopolisation that can exist and the need to deal with that. We certainly intend to look at the matter.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): Despite all that the Minister said, will he confirm that rural passenger bus journeys have actually decreased every year under the Labour Government; that the countryside is in crisis; and that the grants for rural bus services are peanuts compared with the amount of extra fuel tax levied on country people by the Government? Will he confirm exactly what he meant during last week's debate on the fuel crisis—that the Deputy Prime Minister could not be bothered to attend—when he said that, far from being abolished, the fuel duty escalator may be brought back by the Government and will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis in the future?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman has, once again, got virtually all his facts wrong. First, there has not been declining ridership on bus services—he should get his facts right; the £175 million has funded 1,800 new and enhanced services. There has been increased ridership—an extra 16 million passenger journeys.

Secondly, it takes a bit of brass neck for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that the countryside is in crisis. In 1997, when his Government completed 18 years in office, only a quarter of parishes had a daily bus service.

Thirdly, I repeat that since 1997 the level of duties has actually declined as a proportion of the total price. The reasons for the increase are the tripling of international crude oil prices and the shortage of petrol on wholesale markets. We intend to deal with that issue, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make a statement.

Let me clarify what the hon. Gentleman wrongly quoted me as saying in the debate last week. I did not say that the fuel duty escalator would be brought back; I specifically denied that. *[Interruption.]* That is on the transcript, so the hon. Gentleman can read it. I said that the Chancellor had abandoned the fuel duty escalator—which the Tory Administration introduced in 1993, and which is responsible for the largest part of the increase in petrol prices since then—and would now review the situation on a case-by-case and year-by-year basis. If the hon. Gentleman wants to make an attack, he should get his facts right.

Mr. Norman: Again, the Government appear to be in denial both on the fuel crisis and on the crisis in the countryside. What could be more provocative than Ministers seeking to claim that the Government have not put up fuel duty in the past three years? Nothing could be more provocative for the protesters, and nothing could be more unwise, in advance of the events of next week. What could be more provocative than a Minister standing at the Dispatch Box claiming that the number of bus passenger

journeys in the countryside has increased, when the Government's own figures show that that number may have gone up in London, but has declined in the shire counties in the past three years? If the Minister disagrees with me, why does he not quote the figures in his response?

Has the Minister disowned the comments in his 1996 document "Consensus for Change", which said:

it is essential that taxation does not result in further isolation of those in rural areas . . . ?

Who does he think has been disadvantaged most by the Government's increase in the fuel duty, other than those who are most vulnerable—farmers and those who live in the countryside in relative poverty?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before the Minister responds, may I point out that I want brief questions from those on the Opposition Front Bench, and brief answers from Ministers.

Mr. Meacher: I will be brief, Mr. Speaker, because it is easy to be so. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) made a very long, dreary and ineffective speech last week, and he appears to have the same habit when he asks questions. May I respond to the one point that he made? I did not say that there had been no increase in duty; I said that VAT and duty as a proportion of the total petrol price were now lower than in 1997. To blame the Government is completely wrong. The cause is the tripling of oil prices.

Magna Project (South Yorkshire)

7. **Mr. Denis MacShane** (Rotherham): What proposals he has to improve road access to the Magna project in south Yorkshire. [133307]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): The planning permission for Magna granted by Rotherham metropolitan borough council requires access to the visitor attraction from the south to be via junction 33 of the M1. Some £500,000 of the resources available to Magna have been set aside for additional road works, signage and traffic-calming measures at that junction and on the road layout to the Magna project.

Mr. MacShane: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for that answer. She will be aware that Magna is a millennium project that, sensibly, is opening next year—the first year of the millennium—so as to avoid the curse of everything that opened in 2000. The access road to the project from the Meadowhall shopping centre is important, and Rotherham and Sheffield councils are working together. The project is essential for economic regeneration, so will my hon. Friend ask her officials to consider giving priority for the new access road in the first five years of the 10-year development plan for south Yorkshire? If she cannot answer that technical point from the Dispatch Box today, will she receive a delegation to explore the problem further?

Ms Hughes: As I said, the success of Magna is not dependent on roadworks at junction 34, but my hon. Friend strongly makes the case for improved links between Meadowhall and Magna. However, it is for the south Yorkshire local authorities, in the local transport plan, to set their priorities for the first five years and then for the second five years. They have indicated that there is a possibility for 2006 and beyond, but that is not in the first five years of the plan. They are considering priorities in relation to the objective 1 programme. I should certainly be happy to talk further to my hon. Friend, but the priorities for such schemes need to be set locally.

Ring Roads

8. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): When he plans to make a decision on the location of new ring roads; and how many of those have been determined so far. [133308]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): We have not determined the location of the up to 100 bypass schemes for which funding is provided in our 10-year transport plan. That will depend on priorities identified in developing regional transport strategies and local transport plans.

Sir Teddy Taylor: In setting that programme, will the Minister accept that the south-east of England, and Southend in particular, has become about the most over-congested area of the nation, and the most neglected for road programmes? Bearing in mind the impact that that has on employment, is he willing to receive an all-party deputation from Southend to discuss possible solutions, including a ring road, which is urgently needed?

Mr. Hill: It is up to Southend borough council to determine its transport priorities in seeking Government funding through its local transport plan. We have heard the judgment of Southend borough council, and the council's full local transport plan, which was submitted this July, includes proposals for public transport improvements in the A13 corridor and road improvements in the A127 corridor to assist freight movements, but no proposal for a northern A127 bypass of the town. The hon. Gentleman should address his concerns to the local authority. The Government's position is that it is for local people to find local solutions to local transport problems, and we shall do our best to support them.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend think that, in designing new ring roads, it is essential to agree that they should indeed be ring roads, so that they do not immediately become clogged with parked traffic and so on, which defeats the purpose of building such roads?

Mr. Hill: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. That is exactly the sort of matter that we consider in our very careful appraisal of all proposals for ring roads—or, to use the more modern terminology, bypass proposals.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Given the appalling state of the nation's roads following the dreadful cuts in the roads programme inflicted by the Labour party, would not the Minister be well advised to give his attention to those road problems? When the nation's

railways are in crisis, and many of the nation's roads are flooded and covered by fallen trees, is it not extraordinary that he makes the announcement:

> My Department is proposing to make bells on bicycles compulsory . . . ?

At a time of transport crisis, has he not shown that the Government are losing their touch?

Mr. Hill: A good try by the hon. Gentleman—but I should have thought that as an avid cyclist, he would have welcomed that announcement. Indeed, I have led him on my own bike through the roads of London. We are in a difficult position, we are taking it very seriously and we are addressing our immediate attention to the transport difficulties that we are now experiencing—but do not knock the cyclists.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Would not the best possible thing that the Government could do for the city of Lancaster be to reverse the many years of Tory neglect, to aid the environment, to underpin a sustainable public transport system and vastly to increase the prospects of economic regeneration, by announcing the funding for Lancaster's western bypass in December, so that it can be built?

Mr. Hill: Another day, another demand. That is the second time that I have heard that demand from my hon. Friend, who participated in an Adjournment debate on precisely the same subject in Westminster Hall this morning. I commend him on his assiduous representation of his constituents' interests. I must say now what I said to him earlier: the bypass is a proposal in the local transport plans, on which we will make our announcements before Christmas.

Bypasses

9. **Mr. Peter Viggers** (Gosport): What plans for bypasses have been *(a)* cancelled and *(b)* proposed by the present Government. [133309]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): Twenty of the 40 schemes in our targeted programme of trunk road improvements are bypasses. We cancelled the Salisbury and Hereford bypasses because of their impact on environmentally sensitive sites.

Mr. Viggers: According to the Government's own figures, they receive £36.5 billion in taxation from motorists and spend £4.9 million a year on road building. Is that fair?

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman should bear in mind the fact that this Government are committed to a sensible and achievable programme of bypasses and trunk road improvements. Twenty of the 40 schemes in our £1.5 billion targeted programme of trunk road improvements will provide bypasses for local communities, creating safer and healthier environments for those suffering from the effects of heavy volumes of traffic.

We are responding to local demands, and we have an achievable and realistic programme. We are not in the business of subscribing to fantasy lists of road schemes, such as those in which the preceding Administration engaged. Indeed, nearly half of the schemes included in the 1990 "Roads for Prosperity" White Paper had bitten the dust six years later. This Government are about serious improvements in our trunk road system, and we are delivering them.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most important reasons for bypasses is to relieve the narrow and ancient streets of small market towns and villages from the ever larger heavy lorries that must rumble through them? Will he confirm that the Government support such bypasses in the 10-year plan, and are prepared to fund them? Now that Suffolk county council has finally recognised the need for the Bungay bypass in its structural plan, I hope that some money will be found within a reasonable time scale to enable that project to become reality.

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend makes a fair point on behalf of his constituents. We agree in principle; we shall be examining the detailed proposal in due course and making an announcement.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): The Minister mentioned the cancellation of the Hereford bypass—a scheme that the previous Government downgraded. Given that there is much concern in the city of Hereford about the road traffic problem, will the Minister agree to meet representatives of Herefordshire council, of the local chamber of commerce and of business and environmental groups, to see which schemes, short of a full bypass, could be taken forward to help relieve that problem?

Mr. Hill: I am, of course, open to any reasonable request for a delegation, and we are obviously perfectly happy to consider proposals made by the hon. Gentleman and the local authority. After all, our recently announced 10-year transport plan will ensure the funding of up to 100 bypasses on national and local roads and 130 other major local road improvements, and will deliver up to 80 major national trunk-road schemes to improve safety and traffic flow at junctions. Against that backdrop, we are of course a listening Government, and will certainly listen to his concerns.

Local Authority Housing

10. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What role tenants will play in deciding the future of local authority housing. [133310]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Mr. Nick Raynsford): Tenants should be fully involved in making decisions on the future of their homes. The introduction of best value and tenant participation compacts will ensure that they are fully involved in reviewing and developing options for future investment in housing.

Dr. Iddon: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. On this issue, there is obviously clear blue water between the Government's policies and those of the Conservatives, who would flog off all local authority stock with little

consultation with tenants. When my hon. Friend consults local authority tenants on the options in the recent housing Green Paper, will there be a level playing field?

Mr. Raynsford: The answer is yes. We have made it clear that local authorities and local authority tenants have a range of options to consider, including the new proposal for arm's-length companies and the possibility of investment through the private finance initiative, as well as the possibility of stock transfer. I know that my hon. Friend and his local authority have been exploring variations on those models with a community regeneration company in Bolton. I congratulate him and his authority on those discussions, and particularly on the fact that the Bolton Association of Tenants and Residents Associations—BATRA—has been fully involved. That, by contrast with the policies pursued by the Conservative party, is a model of the way in which the Labour party believes tenants should be involved.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Does the Minister recall the Secretary of State, who is also the Deputy Prime Minister, saying that "in the wake" of a Labour Government—I am sure that that phrase is appropriate—he wanted to see the return of council house building, and promised 100,000 council houses every year? Will he now admit that the Government have done a U-turn and adopted the Conservative policy of taking council housing stock out of local authority control?

Mr. Raynsford: No, I will not. The Government have set a highly ambitious programme to deal with the entire backlog of substandard council housing within 10 years, which gives everyone living in council housing the prospect of having a decent home within that time. That is a major change from the previous position. We have said that it is up to tenants and local authorities to explore a range of options for the future of the housing stock. Some will pursue the option of stock transfer, and some will want to keep the property in council ownership and improve it, using the new arrangements that the Government have put in place. That is entirely in line with the principles of the housing Green Paper, which was entitled "Quality and choice: A decent home for all". It is precisely quality and choice that we are pursuing for public sector housing.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement that council house tenants will have a role in determining their destiny. Will he also take into consideration the fact that resources are needed to replace metal frame windows and improve bathrooms and kitchens? He noted the point that was made earlier, but will he give further consideration to providing resources to make sure that we can improve our council houses and bring them up to 21st-century standards?

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. I can assure him that through the spending review, we have secured continued substantial increases in resources to enable local authorities to improve their housing stock, and to allow an increased supply of new, affordable housing to be built. I can also tell my hon. Friend that from next April we are introducing the major repairs allowance, which will for the first time give local authorities a proper basis for the maintenance of their housing stock, to stop the deterioration that was such a lamentable characteristic of council housing under the previous Government.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The Minister knows that many tenants have already voted to transfer to housing associations, such as Banbury Homes in my constituency. Those housing associations have agreed and settled business plans with the Housing Corporation. Will the Minister give an undertaking that those business plans will be honoured?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is referring, I think, to the proposals for rent restructuring in the Green Paper. They are designed to ensure a more coherent framework in future for the rents that apply both to registered social landlords and to local authorities. We have had productive and detailed discussions with registered social landlords and other interested parties about the impact of the rent restructuring proposals, and I am pleased to say that they have been carried forward in a constructive spirit of seeking to achieve the Government's objective, to which everyone subscribes, and at the same time safeguarding the viability of RSLs.

I have several times given assurances that it is not our intention to threaten the viability of organisations that have entered into plans for the future based on long-term financial arrangements. It is certainly our intention to see that their future is secured.

Traffic Congestion (South-East London)

11. **Mr. Clive Efford** (Eltham): What steps he is taking to improve public transport and relieve traffic congestion in south-east London. [133311]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): Our 10-year plan for transport provides substantial resources for transport improvement in London. The Mayor of London has a crucial role to play in deciding priorities for south-east London.

Mr. Efford: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. If we are to address some of the problems experienced by my constituents—notably the increasing traffic on the roads from Kent and East Sussex that come through my constituency—planning and powers beyond London and beyond the Mayor's sphere of operation will be required. It is for the Department to deal with that. Furthermore, in my hon. Friend's future discussions with London Transport, which he will continue to have in spite of the introduction of the Mayor, will he impress upon London Transport the need to improve links with the new North Greenwich underground station, so that people can access it for their travel to work?

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend is right to say that transport issues in south-east London must be considered in a wider context. Indeed, they are being considered in the context of the Thames gateway strategy. Links to North Greenwich station have proved an enormous success in this millennium year, and we are looking carefully at ways

in which they can be sustained. I am confident that effective transport links to that station will remain after this year has ended.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Does the Minister agree that notwithstanding the recent problems caused by severe weather, public transport in south-east London was already in complete chaos as a result of recent work by Railtrack? Does he agree that if that work was necessary, it was incumbent on Railtrack and the train operating companies to provide the travelling public with reliable information? Was not the lack of information a disgrace? Does the Minister agree with my constituent, Mr. Steve Wharton, who suggested in *The Guardian* today that we now have a "notional" rail inquiries service?

Mr. Hill: Those were exceptional circumstances. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point in saying that the travelling public—or the would-be travelling public—deserve a better information service. That service did not work during yesterday's difficulties, and it ought to have done. Frankly, many aspects of the system ought to have been able to withstand yesterday's circumstances, and the Government are paying urgent attention to that matter.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): May I tell my hon. Friend of the great relief in my constituency and throughout south-east London when Connex South Central lost its franchise? However, there was then some dismay because GoVia, the company that is to receive that franchise, has, in its operation of Thameslink in my constituency, a record of punctuality even worse than that of Connex South Central. Will the Minister give my constituents guarantees that rail services in south-east London will be improved?

Mr. Hill: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns and very much appreciate the way in which she has put them. Decisions on refranchising are for the franchising director, but I am sure that he took into account the totality of GoVia's offer, which includes an £800 million investment in new rolling stock, an undertaking to fit all trains with the train protection warning system, more than 100 extra drivers, station refurbishments, more other staff and more car parking.

Housing Policy (Newcastle)

12. **Mr. Jim Cousins** (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): What assessment he has made of the extent to which the clearance and new house-building policies of Newcastle city council are consistent with regional planning guidance. [133312]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The panel report of the public examination of regional planning guidance for the north-east was published in October. I am currently considering what changes are necessary, and will consult on that in due course. Once the regional planning guidance is finalised, local authorities should ensure that their plans and policies accord with it.

Mr. Cousins: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his answer. Like me, he will understand that there are great possibilities for regeneration in Newcastle. However, mass demolition of neighbourhoods against the wishes of the people who live there should never be part of our policies. The wishes of the people of the inner city, their hopes for the future and their aspirations for themselves and their children are the essential building blocks for reviving neighbourhoods—not property deals.

Mr. Prescott: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes about inner cities—a point that he has made strongly to the House before. However, he will accept that, where there are an awful lot of empty properties that cost local authorities considerable resources, that provides us with an opportunity to have less density in city areas and provide more open spaces, as identified in Lord Rogers' plan. Inevitably, and rightly, that should not be done without the widest consultation and support of people affected by the plans.

Road Building

13. **Mr. Tim Collins** (Westmorland and Lonsdale): When he last met the Royal Automobile Club to discuss road building. [133313]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): Ministers regularly meet the RAC foundation both bilaterally and in the context of the motorists forum. At those meetings various issues are discussed, including road building.

Mr. Collins: Is the Minister aware that the number one priority for RAC members and others in my constituency is the construction of the much needed A590 bypass at High and Low Newton? The Minister knows that the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton) and I have made many representations to her on the matter. The bypass is supported by every tier of local government in the area. Will the Government give the area good news soon?

Ms Hughes: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised that point, because the road provides a good case study for contrasting the action—or non-action—of the previous Government with the action of the current Administration. He knows that a public inquiry approved the building of the road, and that it was included in the previous Government's wish list of 500 schemes in 1993. However, there were two priorities on that list—priority one was maybe; priority two was never. The road received priority two status.

The hon. Gentleman will be glad to know that the Government included the scheme in the programme that was initiated after the roads review. It was remitted to the regional planning conference for consideration of the environmental issues, which the hon. Gentleman will know about. The conference identified the scheme as of regional strategic significance and said that it should be implemented by 2010. Provided that that priority remains, the resources in the transport plan mean that it should be delivered.

Severe Weather Disruption

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): With permission, I wish to make a statement about the violent storms that hit much of England and Wales late Sunday night and early yesterday morning.

We offer deepest sympathy to the relatives and friends of those who tragically lost their lives. There has been tremendous inconvenience and disruption, but our thoughts are especially with those whose homes have been flooded or damaged.

According to the Meteorological Office, the storm that we experienced was the most severe since 1987. There was widespread flooding, very high rainfall and high winds. There were blizzards in the north-west and tornadoes on the south coast. Electricity and gas supplies were disrupted, road and rail links were blocked, airports and sea ports were closed. There was considerable damage to property, especially in coastal areas.

From Sunday evening, emergency teams have been working constantly. There were teams from local authorities, the Environment Agency, Railtrack and the electricity and gas supply industry. The police, fire and ambulance services, and coastguard and lifeboat crews have, with their usual professionalism, provided valuable help and assistance. All have done a magnificent job. I am sure that the House will join me in recording not only our admiration but our heartfelt thanks for a job well done in difficult circumstances.

Normal services are now being restored. The Environment Agency reported that, overall, there has been a general improvement in the flood situation overnight. However, 33 severe flood warnings remain in place, and still more properties are under threat from flooding.

Early indications suggest that the new flood warning systems now used by the Environment Agency have been effective and that lessons have been learned from the past. The Environment Agency will draw up a report on the lessons to be learned from the floods two weeks ago in East Sussex and from the current floods. The report will be circulated to all hon. Members. I believe that an Adjournment debate on such matters took place last week.

The Bellwin scheme, which the previous Government introduced, is in place to provide financial help to local authorities in England in emergencies such as this storm. The arrangements also apply to police and fire authorities, and the National Assembly for Wales operates similar arrangements.

Money is available to help with uninsurable clear-up costs following a serious disaster or emergency. In March this year, my Department wrote to all local authorities to tell them about the scheme and how to use it. Under the scheme, each authority is responsible for expenditure on emergency work up to a threshold of just 0.2 per cent. of its annual budget. Expenditure above the threshold is eligible for 85 per cent. assistance from central Government. Several authorities are already in contact with my Department and we will ensure that their requests for help are dealt with as quickly as possible.

As my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food told the House last Wednesday, we are increasing funding for flood and coastal defence. The Environment Agency's total flood defence expenditure was £261.8 million in 1998–99. In 1999–2000, that increased to £276.1 million. The budget for 2000–01 is £283.1 million, and planned expenditure for 2001–02 is £290.1 million.

There has been considerable discussion of the important planning issues that often arise in connection with these matters. We consulted earlier this year on draft new planning guidance, which will deal with the issue of development in flood risk areas. That considerably improves on the 1992 circular.

Our policy is clear: it is to discourage inappropriate development in flood risk areas. We intend to issue the final version of the new guidance in December. We are therefore—together with the Environment Agency—improving flood warnings; encouraging, and providing more funding for, flood and coastal defence; and encouraging development away from flood risk areas.

The storm that we experienced was certainly extreme. There is much discussion about the influence of global warning on our weather—*[Interruption.]* I mean, global warming. It is still very much a global warning—perhaps that is the word that I should have used. We cannot say that any one storm is due to global warming, but there is growing evidence that the pattern of weather around the world is increasingly stormy and extreme.

The UK is taking a leading role in securing the Kyoto global agreement to reduce greenhouse gases to limit climate change in future. However, we must take practical action now so that we are prepared for a future where extreme weather events are more frequent. That is why we have produced the climate change impacts study for the UK, and why we are producing a series of regional climate change impact studies on how different parts of the United Kingdom will be affected. We can now accurately predict and forecast extreme weather events.

We have to ask ourselves if we are doing enough to cope with the new situation. Should our power lines for trains and homes come down every time we have such storms? Should 1,000 trees fall across our railway lines in the south-east? Should we do more to prevent flooding? Are the drainage systems on our roads really adequate? The storm should be a wake-up call for everyone. Our infrastructure should be robust enough and our preparations rigorous enough to withstand the sort of weather that we have just experienced.

Tomorrow, I will be attending a meeting of the central local partnership with the leaders of central and local government, who have to deal with a great deal of this emergency planning and action. We will want to discuss how to undertake a more in-depth analysis of what is needed to be done. Together with my ministerial colleagues, the emergency services, the Environment Agency and others, we will want to look at how to review our systems for dealing with such emergencies. I have spoken with Sir John Harman, the chairman of the Environment Agency. He intends to play a leading role in this work.

We have measures in place to deal with the immediate effects of this storm. We need to take a longer term look at how we can as a country be better placed to deal with the extreme weather events which we expect to be more frequent in future.

The House will wish to join me in thanking local authorities, the emergency services and many others involved for their unstinting efforts, and in offering sympathy on the loss and suffering experienced by people in the areas affected.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): First, I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement. We are grateful for his unprompted and timely response. I join him in expressing sympathy for those who are bereaved or injured, and for the many thousands of people throughout the country who are suffering the misery of seeing their homes ruined by the flooding. In many instances, this is the second or third time in recent months that they have been flooded. I take this opportunity to join the right hon. Gentleman in thanking the emergency services for their magnificent response to the crisis.

The floods now form a pattern that perhaps first became evident in Easter 1998, with the extensive flooding in middle England. The writing has been on the wall for a little while, and we must recognise that this is a serious problem and will remain so for years to come. Today's response is very welcome, but I ask the Deputy Prime Minister to address a number of issues arising from what is now a very worrying trend.

Does the Deputy Prime Minister feel that there are any lessons to be learned now—I appreciate that these are early days—about the handling of the crisis? For example, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned power lines, and there are widespread reports from Kent today that the switchboard of the local utility company has been jammed solid for the past two days. People who are dangerously affected by power lines are unable to get through to the company to seek advice. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that there is a case, perhaps, for looking into the co-ordination and integration of the crisis response, and providing a single information line to which the public can turn?

Secondly, although we welcome the right hon. Gentleman's confirmation that compensation for local authorities will be forthcoming, will he comment on the remarks made by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who mentioned in the House last week that the process of compensation had been slow? The right hon. Gentleman said that he would respond swiftly, but can he reassure local authorities on what specific action will be taken to ensure that the response is swift and compensation is received?

In the light of the recurring instances of flooding, does the right hon. Gentleman think with hindsight—obviously, he has the benefit of hindsight—that the response of the Environment Agency is a cause for concern? Does he recall that, after the deaths and distress caused by the 1998 floods, the independent review team commented that some of the problem

> can be attributed to weaknesses in the planning and delivery of flood and defence warning policies, and even taking into account all the mitigating circumstances described in this Report, the Environment Agency did not achieve its own performance standards.

Can he reassure the House that, in addition to the inquiry conducted by the Environment Agency, there will be an investigation into its performance, powers and effectiveness in dealing with future flood crises?

Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that the funding for flood defences are adequate? He mentioned that funds are increasing, which is true, but the figures suggest that flood defence expenditure will rise by only about 7 to 8 per cent. over the next two years—I think I am right in that—which is scarcely enough to meet inflation in construction costs alone. The Environment Agency today reports that it has a substantial backlog of expenditure to be met. Does he think that current expenditure plans are adequate?

Finally, on the longer term issues, does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that the commitment to accelerate housebuilding on greenfield land in the south-east and south-west—against the wishes of local people and local councils—may exacerbate the risk of flooding? The Environment Agency warned in 1998 that the Government's estimates for new housebuilding were adding to the pressure and that an area of flood plain the size of Bristol—I appreciate that the guidelines have changed since then—could be built on over the next 20 years. Does he accept that decisions to build in river valley areas that may or may not be designated flood plains but which play an important role in absorbing rainfall—such as Lewes, Hertfordshire north of Stevenage, and the flood plains of Ashford and the Nene valley in Northamptonshire—are exactly what the Environment Agency warned against?

Will the right hon. Gentleman investigate and set out in full the relationship between housebuilding and the development of flood risk and, indeed, the effect of other development in the countryside on flood risk? In the meantime, will he suspend his plans to override the south-east regional planning committee and the wishes of councils in the south-east and south-west? Does he recognise that that is another reason why the Government should reconsider their plans to concrete over the countryside by building the wrong houses in the wrong places, and that doing so risks contributing to future misery caused by the loss of greenfield land and, more important, flooding in our towns and villages?

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his expressions of sympathy and support for the emergency services. All hon. Members would give their full support to those remarks.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the Easter flooding in 1998. I visited Stratford at the time and saw for myself how bad the flood was. A main complaint when I was there was that no prior warnings were received. In light of last week's Adjournment debate on the earlier floods, it is clear that, on the whole, warnings have improved considerably. Sir John Harman has given me one or two examples of failure to give sufficient warning, but in the main there has been a considerable improvement.

The report to which the hon. Gentleman referred was acted on by the Government to ensure that more resources were provided and more warnings were given. It is clear that we have learned some lessons, but there are an awful lot more to learn. That is why I want to bring the parties together, which is important in the handling of a crisis. The Environment Agency now has a responsibility to produce a report at the end of the event to show how it dealt with the crisis. Hon. Members whose constituents were affected can read the report and conclude whether the Environment Agency gave sufficient warnings and acted effectively in the emergency. That demonstrates transparency and accountability. We will wait to see what the report says. I shall certainly be very interested to see it.

[Mr. Prescott]

As every Member with a constituent who has experienced these problems knows, compensation always takes a long time—even for those who succeed in obtaining Bellwin funding—and there are constant complaints about that. Assessing all the damage obviously takes time, but I think that the complaint is legitimate. Ministers hide behind the Bellwin fund, saying, "Don't worry, there is a fund to help", but they know that it can be difficult to gain access to the money. I shall review the rules that apply in such circumstances in the forum that I mentioned.

We—my Department and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—have increased funding from our own resources considerably, but what worries me is that we tend to plan for circumstances that are far less serious than we should reasonably expect. I do not think that what we assume to be extreme circumstances are being catered for by the present arrangements. For instance, are the pumps on the roads strong enough to disperse the floods that we are currently experiencing? Structures on the east coast railway lines are regularly pulled down because they were built on the cheap, and there was no proper investment. I am not making a political point—it happened under both parties—but the fact remains that we are not devoting the necessary resources to conditions that we may describe as extreme, but must now accept as normal.

I assume that the hon. Gentleman was making a political point at the end of his question, when he spoke of the housing requirements of the south-east. The Conservatives are getting very excited about them, but they are being discussed by local authorities and in the House, and we must make judgments about them. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Serplan requirement was for 33,000 homes a year. Professor Crow suggested 55,000; we anticipated 43,000, and the current figure is about 39,000.

If the Opposition argue that local authorities should not be forced to accept a higher figure, why did Kent county council, in the last year of Tory government, increase the number of dwellings by 3,000 over and above the local authority requirement? I do not know whether they were built on the flood plains to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but who decided that houses should be built on flood plains? The answer is local authorities. That, I believe, is the Opposition's approach. They say, "Do not let central Government have a role; leave it to local authorities." Local authorities, not central Government, were responsible for building on the flood plains.

I could make my political points, but I do not think that that would help. Let us get on seriously with doing the job. The Opposition should look to their past as well as to the future, and show a little more humility.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, as we speak, the River Aire in the Bradford district in the north of England is at a 50-year high, flooding many homes and cutting off bridges and towns including Bingley, Shipley, Baildon and Burley-in-Wharfedale? There are no rail services and few road services. There have been several evacuations, in which hundreds have been evacuated. Obviously, many local people are very concerned. Will my right hon. Friend monitor the developments closely and liaise with the local authority about the financial implications?

Mr. Prescott: I shall certainly do those things. Monitoring is very important. As I said in my statement, I consider this to be a wake-up call. I think that all of us—the Government, local authorities and public and private operators—should ask ourselves whether we could do more to prevent the misery which many of our citizens suffer on such occasions.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's statement, especially given that only yesterday the Prime Minister's official spokesman told journalists that there were no plans for such a statement to be made. Interestingly, Mr. Alastair Campbell used a rather cryptic expression, saying, "The weather has been devolved." I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman understands what that means.

I join the right hon. Gentleman in offering sympathy to the bereaved families, and to those who have been injured. I also join him in congratulating both the emergency services and local authorities. Does he agree, however, that we should thank the many private individuals who have voluntarily given a great deal of support to those in greater need? In particular, will he congratulate Lewes council, which has had to deal with the problems of floods for more than two weeks?

Given that the right hon. Gentleman has rightly addressed, perhaps for the first time, genuine concern about the impact of global warming, leading to these particular problems, who does he think the Minister for the Environment had in mind when he said in *The Guardian* today:

> It is . . . remarkable that, during the recent fuel crisis hardly anyone mentioned the environment . . . ?

I wonder to whom the Minister for the Environment was referring.

Why did the Deputy Prime Minister say in his statement that the Government are offering more money for flood defences, when the figures, which he even read out, demonstrate that there is no increase whatever over and above inflation? Does he accept that, given that he has admitted that there is more likelihood of severe weather, there should be an increase in funding?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before I call the Deputy Prime Minister, may I say that every hon. Member has a constituency interest in the matter. I want to call everyone. I can do so with the co-operation of the House, if hon. Members' questions are brief.

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) for his support for the emergency services. I—no one else—make statements to the House. I am responsible to the House—no parliamentary or news spokesman is. If I decide that it is right to make a statement to the House, that is what I do. That is what I have done. I did not consult anyone else. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, Alastair.

Like the hon. Member for Bath, I give my support to the voluntary organisations. They are always there. Individuals helped, too—I should have mentioned them

in my statement, as I did in the previous statement on rail. They play an impressive role in such circumstances. They are at home doing nothing and then, all of a sudden, they become heroes. I am sure that the House wishes them well and thanks them for all that they do.

I congratulate the local authority in Lewes. In the past couple of weeks, it has had difficulties; those difficulties did not start just at the weekend. I read about the events to which the hon. Gentleman refers.

With regard to what my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment was referring to in *The Guardian*, I am always a bit sceptical about what we can believe in any paper, including *The Guardian*, but I asked him whether he meant the Liberal party. He said he did not; he meant non-governmental organisations. I might add that it was the Minister for the Environment and I who convened an environmental conference in London during the dispute, so we were constantly making our points. I am not sure that the green groups were, but I shall leave that aside; I have made my point about that before.

As for the giving of more resources, if we put all the groups together, the total amount of money that I should have reported to the House is about £400 million—considerably more than just taking inflation into account.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): We all know that a massive amount of work was done on the railways this weekend, and then we had the crisis because of the weather. May we thank the workers who have been on the railways, out in all weathers?

We still have chaos on the rail railways. Is that because we do not have the number of workers with the skills required? If we are going to maintain a railway—it is crucial that we get lines back working as quickly as possible—we need more skills. Will my right hon. Friend look at the situation, do a skills audit to find out how many more railway men we need to maintain a modern railway, get the industry together and ensure that we get those workers.

Mr. Prescott: I am sure that the House will want to agree with my hon. Friend's comments with regard to the many thousands of workers at the weekend—20,000—who got on with attempting to deal with all the problems with the track. Indeed, on Monday, 10,000 of them were transferred to deal with problems that arose from the weather. There have been difficult circumstances, but I think that we would want to congratulate all those people on their efforts. Ultimately, it will be for the inquiries to determine what factors contributed to the accident.

Nevertheless, contracts and the availability of skilled workers, particularly engineers, are matters of grave concern. I have asked the industry—including the Strategic Rail Authority, Railtrack, railway companies and the health and safety authorities—to report back to me, on Thursday, with a Railtrack recovery programme. When we have that programme clear in our minds, we will be able to develop an emergency programme dealing with train arrivals. I think that that is what people want, and that is what I hope to be able to give them very shortly.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his statement. It will be some consolation to those who have been flooded, or who are about to be flooded, that the alarms work better than they used to. However, could we look more thoroughly into the causes of flooding? Specifically, has the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions been able to assess the contribution made by overhead power lines to global warming?

Mr. Prescott: On the effectiveness of alarms, I quite agree that it is far better to prevent damage. However, there has been very considerable rainfall in the past couple of days, and, as the hon. Lady will know, the run-off of that rain has considerably increased water levels in rivers, such as the one at York. Such conditions are very difficult to deal with, but we should look into whether there is more that we can do, and I shall do that.

I am sorry, but I missed the hon. Lady's point on power lines.

Miss McIntosh: What is their effect on global warming?

Mr. Prescott: I shall write to the hon. Lady.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the misery of the past few days is a clear indication that he got it spot on at Kyoto? Can he tell us what he intends to do, at the follow-up next month, to persuade all the other countries to co-operate to lower CO_2 emissions? What is the United Kingdom going to do to give a lead in the matter?

Mr. Prescott: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions and for his congratulations on the efforts that we have made on the Kyoto protocol. The process now moves to The Hague, where we will have to get an agreement. Although that agreement will be between the developed countries and the developing countries, it will be up to the developed countries to lead the way. I hope that the complications presented by some developed countries do not lead to suggestions that the developing countries will have to sign up to the agreement, as that will make it extremely difficult to reach an agreement. An awful lot of work is being done, however, and the prospect of agreement looks promising—although one can never tell until one gets into the negotiations.

I think that every incident demonstrating climate change reminds everyone, whether he or she lives in a developing or a developed country, that we are all affected by climate change. Climate issues have no national boundaries and affect people everywhere, whether they live in China, Nigeria or America. All those countries will have to reach an agreement on climate change issues.

Lately, I have done quite a bit of travelling—for which I have been criticised—to try to achieve agreement on some of those issues. If a lot of the work is not done before such conferences, they can break down. We were successful at Kyoto because of that type of work. I think that everyone realises that success at The Hague requires a lot of hard work and commitment, and that, if we are not successful there, an awful lot of children in the future will not forgive us.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): Will the right hon. Gentleman give very special consideration to people who have properties that have been damaged or who have suffered uninsurable losses? Will he also bear in mind that

[Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith]

many farmers' crops have been totally destroyed and that those crops were not insured? Additionally, people whose houses may or may not have been on a flood plain have suffered losses that they never expected, because they never expected such a freakish storm.

Mr. Prescott: Of course, the Bellwin fund is about covering local authorities and uninsurable losses; ultimately, however, to be honest, it does not cover farmers. I think that MAFF and other bodies offer other forms of compensation, which should be taken into account.

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): What comfort can the Deputy Prime Minister offer us in relation to the railway's problems in dealing with inclement weather? Earlier, he referred to things being done on the cheap in this country. Does he agree that it is no coincidence that, as soon as we had anything greater than a summer breeze, the overhead railway lines—not the lines causing global warming, but the ones propelling trains—were the first to collapse? Will he suggest to Railtrack management that they go to Switzerland, where the Swiss have been stringing wires up the sides of mountains for many years, and where the wind has been known to blow without causing undue damage? What can we do to get a decent railway?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. In opposition, we both made it clear when we felt that cheap options had been taken to the detriment of the long term. A good example is the electrification of the east coast line. Frankly, that was the second cheaper option that was taken. Those of us who use that line regularly have to face the fact that it keeps coming down. It does not seem to take a very strong wind, certainly not gale force. I think that the wrong option was taken and that we should learn from past mistakes. In my statement I suggested that we should invest in building more security and safety into the infrastructure.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): May I add my gratitude and admiration for the emergency services and Lewes district council for their work during the terrible tragedy that hit my constituency, where 400 houses were evacuated and the entire retail and business area of the town remains shut to this day? May I gently suggest to the Deputy Prime Minister that I am pleased that it served as a wake-up call?

In two Adjournment debates last year, I warned the House that the river defences in Lewes were inadequate, but nothing was done. I hope that will now be corrected. I have just come from a meeting with business leaders in the town who tell me that they are losing £3 million a day. They and the residents of Lewes want a pledge from the Government that there will be a strategic overview of the river Ouse and Uck system and that when recommendations are made for improvements—quickly, I hope—the Government will find the money to introduce those improvements so that there is no repetition of the floods that hit my constituency.

Mr. Prescott: I am advised that the Government are looking at proposals, but I shall write to the hon. Gentleman, as he raises a point that I am not too conversant with in detail, except that I am aware of the problems in respect of private property ownership in the area.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I thank my right hon. Friend for his continuing work to deal with this catastrophe. We now have a new concept for emergency planning. Will he look closely with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Environment Agency at the criteria used to justify expenditure on new flood defences? In respect of the warning that we have now had about global warming, it is essential in the context of the fuel crisis that we have an informed public debate in this country. Is my right hon. Friend prepared to lead that debate and put the issue on the national agenda?

Mr. Prescott: On the latter point, my hon. Friend is aware that the issue is very much on the agenda. I was very careful to make that point, as was my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment. It is difficult for politicians to suggest that global warming may be to blame as it looks as if we are finding an excuse, but the general public read the papers and realise that there is something in it. Those of us who have argued that case for a long time are pleased about that. We are looking at new criteria on cost benefits. It is exactly what we need to do.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I should like to thank the right hon. Gentleman for his statement and the Minister for the Environment for coming down to Bognor Regis on Sunday to see for himself the damage done to hundreds of homes by the tornado that struck the town on Saturday evening.

The Secretary of State is right to praise the emergency services. On Saturday evening and throughout the weekend the police, fire and ambulance services and trading standards and housing officers worked closely together repairing roofs, closing roads and finding alternative accommodation for people who were evacuated from their homes.

Until recently, tornadoes have been very rare in Britain, but the Secretary of State will be aware that in Pagham, just a few miles west of Bognor Regis, there was a small tornado last year. There were also tornadoes in Selsey in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie). Clearly, weather patterns are changing. On the coast we are now seeing much greater extremes of weather, with storms delivering quantities of rain in very short periods of time.

Therefore, we should be taking measures to deal with changing weather patterns. As well as extra sea defences, surely we should now reconsider the level of new housebuilding that the Secretary of State is demanding for the south coast. It is resulting in houses being built on land that has traditionally been regarded as a flood plain because there is simply nowhere else to put them. Will he now take into account the consequences of more building on flood management policies and reduce the number of houses that he is demanding to be built in West Sussex and the coastal counties?

Mr. Prescott: I note that the hon. Gentleman got in his political postscript, but I am grateful for his remarks about

my right hon. Friend's visit to Bognor Regis. The House would want to express its sympathy for the people there, who faced great difficulties with the tornadoes. He made a valuable point about the increasing number of tornadoes. They are very difficult to deal with, whatever preparations are made. We should remember that France lost 10 million trees last year in a tornado that would have hit the south-east but changed direction at the last minute. We must not assume that tornadoes will not hit this country. They are much more difficult to deal with than the flooding and some of the other problems.

Presumably, the hon. Gentleman believes that we are trying to force more housing on his local authority. As I said to the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), the previous Administration increased housebuilding in Kent, against the wishes of the local authority, so they must have thought that more houses were needed than the local authority thought. Also, one must not make the assumption that more houses mean more land. We made it clear that the amount of land considered necessary for housing in Serplan and in our calculation is the same. We simply need a higher density of housing.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Does the experience of the fragmentation of the railways enhance the case for the privatisation of air traffic control?

Mr. Prescott: No.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Will the Secretary of State please take a personal interest in the lack of joined-up government which is having a serious effect on Lindfield in my constituency, where an on-going dispute between the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Environment Agency has led to no action being taken, for a very long time, on a serious flooding problem? I join the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) in calling for urgent work to be done on refining the criteria for flood defences.

Will the Secretary of State consider seriously the points made by other hon. Members from Sussex and elsewhere about overbuilding on the flood plain?

Mr. Prescott: It would help us all if I assumed that every Tory thought that, so they would not have to bring it up in every question.

I do not know the details about the flooding in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, but I am concerned about it, so I will investigate and write to him.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. This morning I visited a constituent, Mr. Alan Butt, who runs the Anchor inn, beside Tintern abbey. The inn was severely flooded a couple of days ago and has been flooded eight times in the past 10 years. The flooding was caused not by the River Wye but by excess water running off the local hillsides. That reveals the lack of investment that local authorities have been able to put into flood prevention. In his review of these matters, will my right hon. Friend consider the powers and resources available to local authorities, so that they can have a similar flood prevention role to that of the Environment Agency?

Mr. Prescott: On local authority finances, we have increased the amount for flood management in the standard spending assessment. My hon. Friend makes an important point about water from hillsides, and buildings can also cause flooding. We shall certainly consider those matters in the review.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I remind the Secretary of State that the first instance of flooding this year was on 15 September in my constituency and that the Environment Agency has still failed to report on the causes. Will he ensure that the agency has sufficient resources to deal with the matter properly, quickly and effectively? Will he investigate the role of Southern Water and the incompetent way in which it failed to protect the Portsmouth pumping station, causing many hundreds of people to go through the traumatic experience of losing their homes? Will he also consider the fact that many of those people were not properly insured or not insured at all? Will the Government sympathetically consider supporting the hardship funds that have been set up to help those people through this very difficult situation?

Mr. Prescott: I do not know in sufficient detail the matter to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I shall certainly investigate it. Sewerage was more of a problem than flooding, but the point is academic if the water is coming in through the front door. I shall certainly investigate Southern Water's inefficiencies in dealing with the problem.

In respect of insurance, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree that the answer is not to have blanket cover for those who have failed to take out insurance. However, I am concerned that an increasingly serious problem will be that insurance companies might tell people regularly faced with floods that they were not prepared to insure them.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the only reason that my town of Reading is not suffering the serious flood damage experienced elsewhere is that many millions of gallons of water at present cover the ancient water meadows to the south of the town? Does he agree that that wholly justifies Labour-controlled Reading borough council's decision consistently to oppose development on that vital flood plain? Such development is suggested every year by Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors in Berkshire.

Mr. Prescott: That sounds correct. I will go along with it.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): May I add to the praise for the emergency services? The Deputy Prime Minister knows that Robertsbridge in my constituency has been flooded four times in a year, and twice in the past three weeks. I am sure that he will understand the sense of devastation among local residents. Will he assure them that he will eliminate delays in Bellwin scheme assistance? Will he urge the Environment Agency to hold a meeting in the village as soon as possible, to ensure that the questions raised in last week's Adjournment debate can be answered and that local voices are heard in planning what else can be done to try to prevent the flooding happening again?

Mr. Prescott: Sir John Harman has told me that the agency does hold meetings, but I shall take up the matter

[Mr. Prescott]

with him. What the hon. Gentleman suggests certainly should happen, and I believe that it will. The agency's relationships with Members of Parliament and constituents are very important.

I shall also look into the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about what we can do to improve what has already been achieved. No hon. Member ever believes that the Bellwin mechanism is fast enough, and I shall certainly look into the matter.

Mr. Andy King (Rugby and Kenilworth): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his determination to do everything possible to alleviate the suffering caused to people by floods. I was amazed at the near hypocrisy expressed by Conservative Members about building on flood plains. I urge them to come to Kenilworth to see for themselves what has happened there as a result of building on the flood plain by Conservative councils and under the previous Conservative Government.

The Environment Agency is working very hard to implement a flood alleviation scheme in Kenilworth, to which it has allocated £200,000. However, the scheme has run up against an obstacle in English Heritage, which is talking about a scheme that would require much more in the way of funds. Will my right hon. Friend use every power available to him to bring the two agencies together with the local authorities so that a flood alleviation scheme in Kenilworth can be put in place that will end my constituents' suffering?

Mr. Prescott: I shall certainly see what I can do to bring the agencies together. There is no reason why they should not come together to reach some agreement, even if it is one that is not acceptable to my hon. Friend. I reserve judgment on the matter, but it is important and I will do what I can.

My hon. Friend makes some powerful points about flood plains. The House should remember that the previous Administration merely published a circular—a type of advice note—on the problem in 1992. Most houses on flood plains were built by Tory councils under a Tory Government. The Opposition still want local councils to make such decisions, even though difficulties such as my hon. Friend described tend to arise. However, 10 per cent. of the population live in houses built on what are presently defined as flood plain fields, and we have to take that into account.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): The regulator apparently puts repairs to foul water and surface water drainage low on the list of priorities contained in his guidance to water companies. Given the increased incidence of flooding, will the Deputy Prime Minister invite the regulator to reconsider those priorities and to encourage water companies to give repairs to drainage pipes for foul and surface water a far higher priority than hitherto?

Mr. Prescott: One of the first things that the Government did on coming to office was to make it clear to the water authorities that there was far too much wastage of water, and that they had to start mending the pipes. They have done that, and wastage has fallen from something over 30 per cent. on average to nearer 20 per cent. That is a step forward.

I do not know enough about the point that the hon. Gentleman makes to be specific in my reply, but I will draw what he has said to the regulator's attention. I will then write to the hon. Gentleman with the regulator's response.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): At his meeting on Thursday, will the right hon. Gentleman urge Railtrack to have an extensive local advertising campaign so that commuters may know how long it will take to do this vital work and when the rail timetables will be restored to normalcy?

Secondly, does he agree that if we are to make real progress on the reduction of global warming, somebody has to find a way of persuading the Americans to use less energy?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which I have made constantly to the Vice-President and others, about how America must lead the way in these matters. The Americans have committed themselves to targets; however, it is one thing to do that but another to achieve them, particularly where the use of oil and energy is concerned. Still, we have to continue with the arguments. Some people said that the Americans would not sign up for anything, but they did. Now we must ensure that the policies are implemented. That is what The Hague meeting is about.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about getting Railtrack and others to give more information. I went to my railway station on Sunday to find out about the trains on Monday morning. There was a big queue, but only one person was giving advice and selling tickets. I should have thought, given the crisis, that more people would have been available at the stations to give such information. We have asked Railtrack to report on that on Thursday. People are entitled to know what is happening and what is causing problems—not knowing leads to frustration, and we intend to try and end that.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I join my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) and for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) in congratulating my right hon. Friend on his tremendous work in taking a lead in Kyoto. Now that it is clear from nearly all the scientific evidence around the world that climate change is real and is here to stay, we must redouble our efforts to improve public understanding of some of the issues so that people can use direct measures to reduce their energy consumption. We need to improve the debate about the future of power generation in this country to ensure that we do more and more to improve our contribution to the future of Kyoto protocols.

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend makes important points. Perhaps we could start here, by reducing the temperature in our offices and in the House of Commons. That would be a step in the right direction. With regard to power and energy efficiency, our climate change levy is designed to do precisely that.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Speaking for a constituency that floods each and every year, I suggest that prevention is better than cure. We will not deal with the problem simply by building higher and higher walls.

Should we not look at the management of whole river catchment systems and consider involving more than one Department in that process? For instance, we could use farms that would otherwise be lying idle to retain water and prevent the flooding of places where people live.

Mr. Prescott: I support the hon. Gentleman's idea, and we will look at it seriously. It is not just about building banks—the rise and fall of water is so great—but about how much water is getting into our waterways and whether we can manage the system more effectively. I think that we can, and it means looking again at planning and building regulations and other things that need to be considered to manage the situation properly, and we intend to do that.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Is it not the case that the real cause of these extreme weather conditions has very little to do with housebuilding in Kent and far more to do with 100 years of burning fossil fuels such as gas, coal and oil? Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that, when the Government consider their future policy on fuel duty, the principles of the Kyoto protocol and the tough targets on CO_2 emissions will underpin that policy?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend can be sure that that is exactly the course that I advocate with my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): For my constituents in Folkestone, the considerable disruption and inconvenience caused by the weather were aggravated by the closure of the M20 motorway for use, yet again, as a lorry park under Operation Stack. Now that Kent county council has identified alternatives to the motorway for this purpose, will the Government take action to put an end to a state of affairs which, for my constituents, is quite unacceptable?

Mr. Prescott: It is difficult to deal with such problems unless the lorries can be moved on. That is probably the best way to deal with the matter. I am prepared to listen to other ideas, although it is hard to think what they might be. I support the action.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): My right hon. Friend referred to the many homes built on flood plains. Bearing in mind our current knowledge, does he think that those who, contrary to the advice of the Environment Agency, build homes on flood plains, bear some responsibility towards those whose homes flood? Might that responsibility include making a contribution towards compensation?

Mr. Prescott: The Environment Agency has objected to building on flood plains in relatively few cases. Our new planning guidance, which I mentioned in my statement, will make it clear that our preference is against building on flood plains and that the approach has to be scaled in different ways, because there are many different types of flood plain. For example, although Holland is one entire flood plain, houses can be built everywhere because the appropriate investments are made to deal with water dispersal.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in extending the House's sympathy to the residents of Allbrook, which is in my constituency? They and their properties were engulfed by 5 ft of mud and water on Monday morning. I am sure that other hon. Members have similar stories. Will he also congratulate those residents on using their own resources to clear out their homes with equipment and pumps?

I believe that the right hon. Gentleman suggested in his statement that 0.2 per cent. of a local authority's annual budget should be allocated for contingencies and emergencies. If that is correct, what plans does he have to upgrade or modify the guidelines that are issued to local authorities to ensure that they have adequate contingency and emergency plans in place to deal with such events?

Mr. Prescott: That is a fair point. In such situations, we make statements in the House but the reality is that people may have to spend weeks drying out their homes with heaters or pumps. I learned many lessons in Stratford, and I shall take up the points that the hon. Gentleman made in my discussions with local authorities.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): What immediate action will the Deputy Prime Minister and the Environment Agency take to ensure that, the next time there are heavy rains, we can keep open the M25, the A3, other motorways and main trunk roads, and railway lines? It is his responsibility to offer protection against flooding. What will he do to ensure that my constituents can get to work and school next time that there are heavy rains, although they could not do so this time?

Mr. Prescott: It is becoming increasingly clear—I referred to this earlier—that roads, including the M25, were flooded because inadequate pumps were used in an attempt to save money. The right hon. Gentleman should consider whether he covered every eventuality when he was in government. On the railway system, it is certain that inadequate investment for a couple of decades at least—more, I think—resulted in the failures that we are trying to deal with today. It is a pity that he does not show a bit more humility.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): The Deputy Prime Minister earlier said that he had had to travel a lot recently. Does he accept that there is a link between increases in air travel and global warming? Will he note that there is no tax on air fuel and that the present system wastes fuel? What ideas will he take to the Netherlands next month to secure an international agreement on that, and what proposals do the Government have to regulate the current waste of air fuel and its environmental consequences, and on the polluter pays principle?

Mr. Prescott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important point. We have argued the international case in all the national and international arenas. All nations need to reach agreement—we need a global agreement and a global solution. Although that matter is not in the Kyoto agreement, we are pressing the case very hard.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for the sympathy that he expressed for those, including the hundreds in my constituency, who have suffered great loss in their homes and of their possessions because of flooding. Will he join me in paying tribute to the Epping Forest district council

[Mrs. Eleanor Laing]

emergency response team, which was able to go straight into action late on Sunday night because of good early warning systems, and which helped to alleviate problems? Will he also pay tribute to the many voluntary organisations, including the Women's Royal Voluntary Service and the Red Cross, which helped people who had to be evacuated, and the Royal Engineers? Will he also thank those who provided lifeboats? We do not have any in Epping forest, because we rarely need them.

If the Secretary of State is right about the fact that flood alleviation schemes are not suitable for the more severe weather conditions that he has predicted, will the Government give us more money to provide more efficient schemes?

Mr. Prescott: I have already told the House that we have been giving more funds, but in the end it is about reorganising. Of course I will join the hon. Lady in thanking all the people who helped. They are the unsung heroes, and I hope that she makes the front page.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): The Deputy Prime Minister has had to make a statement because of exceptional weather circumstances. Does he recognise the anxiety of the people in Ryde in my constituency, who live in fear of flooding every time that there is moderate rainfall because they rely on pumps that are 30 years old for their land drainage? Will he ensure that, when we finally have an agreed scheme, that is funded? In the meantime, will he look sympathetically at the plight of people who cannot insure their homes, not because of exceptional weather circumstances but because of the failure of the public authorities to install a proper drainage scheme?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point and it is one to which I referred. If one is constantly under threat, one cannot get insurance. Those are the people who face real difficulties in areas where flooding is likely. I imagine that the matter comes under the flood defence authority, or perhaps one of the drainage or water authorities. I will make inquiries and write to him.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): The Secretary of State knows that Selsey in my constituency has now been hit twice by tornadoes in three years, although yesterday's was much less severe than the very worrying tornado that did great damage three years ago. Given the huge amount of water that has fallen on the downs, Chichester will be vulnerable to flooding for the whole winter. My constituents were heartened by the remarks of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food last week in an Adjournment debate. He said that grant aid was ready and waiting to ensure that the scheme to alleviate the danger of sea flooding in Selsey and the Chichester flood relief scheme are not delayed.

Let me bring the Secretary of State back to building in the flood plain. I am not making a party political point and I hope that he will take it in a non-partisan way, but if huge numbers of extra houses are demanded in an area such as Chichester, where large areas are virtually off-limits for construction because they are areas of outstanding natural beauty—part may soon be a national park—much of the construction will have to be in places that are vulnerable to flooding. Therefore, when he looks at planning policy guidance 25, will he reconsider the level that he is demanding for the construction of new housing in my constituency?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman raised the matter in an Adjournment debate, which was answered by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary. As I understand it, the funding is available, but it is a matter of getting the preferred option and agreement so that it is there. We will put on pressure to achieve that as quickly as possible and we will get a settlement. On Chichester and housing, I do not know the exact details. The hon. Gentleman knows that, in December, we will respond to the various controversies concerning the amount of housing to be available. I am not sure of the allocation for Chichester. In general—this is a sound point—we have made it clear that our housing requirements could be met with the same amount of land used by Serplan by imaginative planning and much higher density housing. I suspect that the housing density in Chichester is one of the lowest in the south-east.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Yesterday, homes in Ross-on-Wye in my constituency were flooded for the first time and, in the city of Hereford, the Belmont roundabout was again under water, causing a traffic gridlock at the junction of two trunk roads. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Environment Agency has applied to become the navigation authority for the River Wye and that the public inquiry into the matter closed in July 1997. The Government have not decided whether to accept the recommendations of the inquiry. Will he look into the matter, consult with his colleagues in the Welsh Office and the Welsh Assembly and ensure that that gridlock is soon past?

Mr. Prescott: I do not know the reason, but I will certainly look into the matter and write to the hon. Gentleman. I do not know whether a navigation authority would have a direct effect in cases such as the flooding to which he referred, but I will look into the matter.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Secretary of State aware that one of the consequences of the floods—by no means the most serious, but not insignificant—is that many right hon. and hon. Members, certainly those with offices in No. 7 Millbank and possibly those in other buildings, received no delivery of mail yesterday and that it was a source of particular distress to me to be deprived of the concerns and opinions of my Buckingham constituents? Will the right hon. Gentleman at least undertake to talk to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to find out whether we can establish from the Post Office how much, if any, mail was damaged or destroyed?

Mr. Prescott: That is a matter for the House authorities. I have no doubt that, as the hon. Gentleman has raised the matter in this way, it will be brought up, although perhaps we are all glad that he was not able to get his mail out.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Is the Minister aware that, in mid-Wales, where we regularly experience flooding, we have experimented with lowering the water

level in one of the reservoirs and that has helped a little? Will he consider a similar experiment in other places that suffer heavy flooding? Will he also ensure that some of the £400 million comes to mid-Wales, where we regularly suffer a great deal because the water table is already saturated?

Mr. Prescott: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, that matter is devolved to the Welsh Assembly, where a statement is being made on it today. Nevertheless, he makes a central point and I shall take it into account.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): In my constituency, there are at least 12 flooding hot spots, which flood regularly when there is heavy rain. First, may I again draw the Deputy Prime Minister's attention to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett)? As the regulator has told Thames Water that, within its pricing formula, for the next two years, it can protect no houses from the threat of sewage flooding, the matter must be addressed. If the proposed water Bill is the right vehicle to do so, I hope that it can be used in that way.

Secondly, will the right hon. Gentleman restore to the borough of Reigate and Banstead the money earmarked for flood defences that was removed from the standard spending assessment about 18 months ago?

Mr. Prescott: In these circumstances, it is possible for local authorities and people affected by flooding to take an interim determination. I am not sure how that works or whether it fits the present circumstances, but I shall write to the hon. Gentleman and try to spell the matter out.

Stem Cell Research

4.33 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 to allow the use of early embryonic tissue for the purposes of research into the development of regenerative therapies.

I welcome the opportunity to bring before the House the recommendations of the Donaldson report on stem cell research. The report of the chief medical officer, published in August, made a series of careful recommendations that the Government have fully supported. It is to the Government's credit that they have stated their support for those proposals—some of which are contained in the Bill—despite media hype on the issue and despite some of the misinformation put out by some opponents of even carefully regulated progress on the matter.

Many hon. Members will have received letters opposing the Bill from their constituents; some—if not most—of those people were organised to lobby on the subject by so-called pro-life organisations, as is their legitimate right. However, I urge the House to remember that—on the other side of the argument—people feel equally strongly that ethical, scientific progress be allowed.

On such matters of conscience, people with similar political views can hold different opinions based on what each person feels to be right ethically and morally. In such circumstances, parliamentarians are generally allowed a free vote on the matter and it is non-party political.

Many of my constituents will feel very strongly in favour of extending the existing law on embryo research and others will feel very strongly against such a change and may wish to repeal the laws that already allow research to take place. In cases such as this, Members of Parliament will not be able to satisfy both sides, and they must come to a considered view. However, those constituents who take a different view to mine have a right to expect three things when I vote on such an issue of conscience: first, that I respect their viewpoint; secondly, that I give a straight answer; and, thirdly, that I have carefully thought about the issues.

I ask the House to support moves to allow stem cell research on early embryos and to support moves to reaffirm the existing prohibition on reproductive cloning where such embryos would otherwise be allowed to developed well beyond the legal 14-day limit. It is understood that the Government will introduce regulations to implement those recommendations. That will not be before time, because Parliament has not had the chance to consider this matter since the issue of so-called cloning hit the headlines more than three years ago, since when seven expert ethical and scientific bodies have called for those changes in the law. Today's short exchange is a long overdue start of public and parliamentary discussion of the proposals.

I wish to discuss the benefits of stem cell research. It is hoped that this research can find ways of allowing patients with cancer, organ failure, degenerative diseases—such as Parkinson's disease and arthritis—or spinal cord injury to have a so-called transplant of some of their own cells that have been reprogrammed to replace the missing, failing or cancerous cells. In that case, there is a real prospect of finding cures—without the problem of rejection or drug

[Dr. Evan Harris]

toxicity—for debilitating, painful and/or fatal diseases that affect hundreds of thousands of patients every year. Groups representing patients with those diseases, such as the Parkinson's Disease Society, leading medical authorities, such as the Royal Society, campaigning and research charities, led by the co-ordinating Association of Medical Research Charities, and major funding bodies, such as the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council, all support my view of the enormous value of the research.

There is confusion about the legal situation and I wish to clarify that. Under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, which was introduced by the previous Government, the use of the test-tube baby, or in vitro fertilisation, technique inevitably leads to the creation of more embryos than can be safely implanted back into the mother's womb. Under the Act, the spare embryos must be frozen for future use or be destroyed within 14 days. In the interval, the Act allows research to be carried for five—and only five—medical purposes: infertility, miscarriage, congenital disease, contraception and genetic abnormalities.

Three separate authorities, all of which have had both medical and theological input, have considered the question of whether stem cell research should be added to that limited list. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, the Human Genetics Advisory Commission and the chief medical officer's inquiry—the Donaldson report—have all come to the conclusion that there is no moral or ethical barrier to extending the list of purposes to cover stem cell research, but that the existing ban on reproductive cloning should continue. Leading ethical bodies, such as the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the British Medical Association, have also considered the matter and agree.

Clearly, there is much mainstream support for an extension of the research purposes permitted and it is impossible to ignore that body of opinion. That may indeed by why the Government have supported the proposals and said that they plan to recommend this law change to Parliament.

However, there are several things that my Bill and the proposals are not about. They are not about undermining the special status accorded to the embryo. Embryos of up to 14 days are much smaller than the head of a pin and the 14-day cut-off is chosen because that is the earliest time at which the first beginnings of the structure—the primitive streak—that would eventually turn into the central nervous system can appear. Research on the cells involves microscopic techniques and there is no question of experimenting on anything that remotely resembles a foetus or of there being sentient life involved. The Donaldson report points out that the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority must ensure that the research proposals are the only way to achieve progress on this matter.

Many people—although not I believe a majority—sincerely and consistently believe that life begins at conception and that the fertilised egg and early embryo have exactly the same rights to life and integrity as a viable foetus, baby or adult. That appears to be the view of some here, and I respect it. However, it is not a view that I share, and nor is it held by most religious and ethical authorities in this country.

Some have argued that embryos should not be used as spare parts for surgery or treatment, but it is not the intention to use embryos as the source of cells to cure degenerative diseases, organ failure or cancer. If such research is successful, it will be possible to derive all the stem cells needed from the patient's own cells, without the need to use embryos. However, as the only source of appropriate stem cells at present is from early embryos, some limited research on embryonic tissue is essential if our medical researchers are to achieve an understanding of the conditions under which adult stem cells can be derived.

Even if it were desirable to use embryo-derived stem cells to cure disease, the very short supply of donated eggs or embryos would prevent that. Such a donation is a very significant step for a woman to take. Hon. Members can therefore be reassured on that point. It has been suggested that adult stem cells can already be used and that there is therefore no need to undertake research on embryonic stem cells. That is not the case according to the overwhelming majority of medical and scientific opinion that I have cited.

Adult stem cells hold real promise, but there are some significant limitations to what can be accomplished with them. However, if the research is successful, it is hoped that it will be possible to derive all the stem cells needed from a patient's own cells. Embryonic stem cell research would be a temporary step necessary to develop ways of using adult stem cells. Some have claimed that that would be a step on the road to reproductive cloning. On the contrary, I support the proposal that the existing ban on reproductive cloning should be reinforced with a new law against it, as recommended by Donaldson and supported by the Government.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, under which such matters are regulated in the United Kingdom, is widely recognised as the most comprehensive legislation in the world and as being effective at preventing abuses of the technology. Donaldson and the Government are right to follow the path of a further ban on reproductive cloning.

Some point out that the European Parliament has voted in favour of a ban on stem cell research. However, the European Union does not have precedence over the United Kingdom's laws on such scientific research. The EU motion opposes not only stem cell research but abortion, which has been legal in this country for 33 years, IVF techniques and our own 1990 Act. That Act provides among the strongest safeguards against illegality in such matters to be found anywhere in the world. The vote was narrowly won by a majority of seven, and expressed an opinion of politicians from the mainly Catholic countries of southern Europe. Almost all Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members of the European Parliament voted against it.

The proposals in my Bill would not suddenly allow what is called therapeutic cloning. That is already legal under the 1990 Act. They would simply allow that technique to be extended to research into regenerative therapies. I believe that the Donaldson report is a serious one and that the Government are right to support it, and I commend the Bill to the House.

4.42 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I appreciate that this is a very difficult issue for the House; we are now entering a moral maze. I also appreciate the great

knowledge and commitment brought to such matters by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris). Many hon. Members will be desperately concerned about the appalling diseases, especially in children, that could be dealt with by such research. The hon. Gentleman has done the House a service in bringing the matter forward. However, I shall oppose the Bill for three reasons.

First, I believe that it is unethical. I shall deal with that in a moment. Secondly, contrary to what the hon. Gentleman says, I believe that it could pave the way to human cloning. Lastly, also contrary to what he says, I believe that it is unnecessary; the use of adult stem cells represents an alternative.

The House will agree that the ethical issues are probably the most important. Every hon. Member was once an embryo, and we are talking about people who could develop into full human beings. I, and many others, believe that the use of early embryonic tissue—or unborn children, for that is what they are—purely for their cells is morally and ethically repugnant. The process proposed involves taking the stem cells of young embryos, growing them into other body tissues and experimenting on them to develop new body parts for the sufferers of some diseases. However, that will involve the artificial creation of thousands of human embryos purely to use them and then kill them. I believe that that is wrong.

If, like me, the House believes that one cannot draw a line during the development of an unborn child and say that one day it is a human being and the next it is not, or that one minute it is a human being and the next it is not, the only logical and ethical conclusion is that life begins at conception.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the cut-off point of 14 days. Photographs recently taken by a Swedish photographer clearly show the development of the brain and an obvious distinction between the two lobes in a 14-day-old foetus. The hon. Gentleman is talking about research into an embryo in which brain cells are growing at the rate of 100,000 neurons a minute. Surely it cannot be said that such growth is not that of an unborn child. We were all at that stage once, and we developed into fully grown people. It surely cannot be argued that it is ethical to perform experiments on such unborn children and to harvest them purely for their stem cells. To allow the creation of life purely for commercial ends and research would take away the inherent value of individuals and their right to life. It would be to treat them purely as a means to an end; as something to be used and then discarded.

As long ago as 1956, the World Medical Association argued that the interests of society should never take precedence in research over those of the individual. It clearly included in its definition of the individual "identifiable human material". That, therefore, included embryos. All of us in this House totally reject the claim by past totalitarian societies that medical research could put the interests of society over those of the individual. To pass the Bill and to argue that embryos—each of which is capable of developing into a full, sentient human being—should be so used would be very dangerous indeed.

The use of early embryonic tissue is thus ethically reprehensible because it allows the creation and destruction of human life on a vast scale. No fewer than 277 embryos were used and destroyed in the creation of Dolly the sheep alone. That takes away the inherent value of the human being and raises the spectre of abuse of the individual in the name of the good of society. That is not acceptable.

My second argument, with which I hope some will agree, is that to allow research into early embryonic tissue would be to allow the development of human cloning, which would inevitably lead to full reproductive human cloning. The process is the same; the difference is only a matter of degrees. The cell nuclear replacement process involves the insertion of a cell from someone into the emptied egg cell, which then divides and multiplies, just as any embryo would. The development of therapeutic research requires the extraction and use of the stem cells that are formed by the egg as it multiplies. It would be only one stage further to allow the egg to develop, implant it into a foster mother and allow it to be born. Thus, we would have the full clone of a human being. Many scientists believe that that is inevitable. Surely, in this of all places, we would want to draw a line to prevent human cloning.

Finally, contrary to the hon. Gentleman's comments, the greatest tragedy of this debate is that research with early embryonic tissue is not inevitable. It is not even essential to development of the life-saving cures of which we hear so much. There is an alternative that is far less ethically controversial: the use of adult stem cells. Such cells are similar to embryonic stem cells, but in some ways better suited to the job. They are more stable and it is easier for scientists to control them.

Recent research has shown that adult stem cells can be just as effective at developing into new tissue. Scientists in Florida have shown that bone marrow stem cells taken from adults can be turned into immature nerve cells and so could be used to help combat diseases such as Parkinson's. As more research has been conducted, adult stem cells have proved to be far more effective than scientists believed. The beauty of the alternative is that it deals with consenting adults; people give permission. The danger of the hon. Gentleman's Bill is that it would deal with people who, by definition, have no control.

I ask the House to reject the Bill on three grounds: it is unethical and morally repugnant, it could lead to full human cloning and, above all, it is not necessary. I appreciate all the vigour and concern that the hon. Gentleman brings to the debate, but as C.S. Lewis said:

> The softest road to hell is the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without sign posts.

I believe that the Bill is a gradual, soft and inevitable road to hell, and I urge the House to reject it.

Question put, pursuant to Standing Order No. 23 (Motions for leave to bring in Bills and nomination of Select Committees at commencement of public business):—

The House divided: Ayes 83, Noes 175.

Division No. 315] **[4.49 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick	Begg, Miss Anne
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy	Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Ashton, Joe	Bercow, John
Banks, Tony	Beresford, Sir Paul
Barnes, Harry	Blackman, Liz
Barron, Kevin	Boswell, Tim
Beard, Nigel	Brake, Tom

Brand, Dr Peter
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clwyd, Ann
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Donohoe, Brian H
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fabricant, Michael
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Gapes, Mike
Gidley, Sandra
Godman, Dr Norman A
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keetch, Paul
Lansley, Andrew
McDonnell, John
Mallaber, Judy
Maxton, John
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mountford, Kali
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Plaskitt, James
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Laurence
Rogers, Allan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Todd, Mark
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Tyrie, Andrew

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Crispin Blunt and Dr. Ian Gibson.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Collins, Tim
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Dismore, Andrew
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Edwards, Huw
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Galloway, George
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Godsiff, Roger
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hepburn, Stephen
Hood, Jimmy
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hurst, Alan
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McCabe, Steve
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Malins, Humfrey
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Meale, Alan
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prior, David
Quinn, Lawrie
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shaw, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trend, Michael
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walter, Robert
Ward, Ms Claire
Wardle, Charles
Wareing, Robert N
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Ann Winterton and Mr. Jim Dobbin.

Question accordingly negatived.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

PRISONS

That the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 (Amendment of Section 10) Order 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 2024) dated 25th July 2000, a copy of which was laid before this House on 26th July, be approved.

INVESTIGATORY POWERS

That the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Notification of Authorisations etc.) Order 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 2563) dated 20th September 2000, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22nd September, be approved.

That the Investigatory Powers Tribunal Rules 2000 (S.I., 2000, No. 2665) dated 28th September 2000, a copy of which was laid before this House on 29th September, be approved.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Children Leaving Care Bill *[Lords]*

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

Clause 1

FURTHER DUTIES OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES TOWARDS CHILDREN WHOM THEY ARE LOOKING AFTER

5.2 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I beg to move amendment No. 11, in page 2, line 16, at end insert—

'( ) The Secretary of State may by regulations specify persons or classes of person who are and persons or classes of person who are not suitable to act as personal advisers under the provisions of sections 19C, 23B(2), 23C(3) and 23D(1).'.

Three months have elapsed between Committee and Report. I am sure that all hon. Members need to cast their minds back to the issues that were raised three months ago. The gap means that the Government have had extra time in which to reflect on some of the excellent points that we made in Committee, and it has also allowed for some fresh thinking by us.

The Bill has a strong measure of support from all parties. We recognise that the system fails care leavers dismally. The facts are worth repeating for any hon. Members who did not participate in earlier stages of our consideration of the Bill, or for whom July is a long time ago. Seventy-five per cent. of young people leaving care have no educational experience and 50 per cent. are unemployed. I am especially struck by an appalling statistic—that up to 25 per cent. of young women leaving care are pregnant or have a child. We, as a corporate parent, are not doing a good job for care leavers. That is the reason for the Bill.

On Report, we want to press several amendments and hear the Government's views on them because they cover points that, on reflection and careful re-reading of all the records of proceedings for the Committee stage, would leave the Bill less effective than it would be if we could persuade the Government to accept the amendments.

Amendment No. 11 would add the provision:

The Secretary of State may by regulations specify persons or classes of person . . . who are not suitable to act as personal advisers . . .

We believe that that is important. As parliamentarians, I am sure that we know that care leavers are among the most vulnerable people in our society. We therefore need to be extremely streetwise about putting them in a position of trust with a personal adviser. We have all learned some hard lessons from our experience of children's services, especially in north Wales and in other parts of the United Kingdom where it has been revealed that unscrupulous individuals prey on children.

We need to understand that the role of personal adviser is one that could be attractive to unscrupulous persons who seek to prey on vulnerable children or young persons. The purpose of the amendment is to strengthen that understanding. We remain concerned about the specific training and qualifications required of young persons' advisers. It is a particular concern of the National Children's Bureau.

[Mrs. Caroline Spelman]

It was made clear by Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, on Report in the other place, that in his view the majority of personal advisers would be drawn from persons who now work with children in care or those leaving care. That was put forward as a point of reassurance to their Lordships. Lord Hunt was saying that those still concerned about the matter need not be.

I still have two residual concerns. Although there are planned changes to the training and development of social workers under the Care Standards Act 2000, it has been acknowledged by the Government that child development has been an area in the training of social workers that may not have had the full attention that it requires. That will be especially important in relation to the new role of personal advisers. If the majority of them are to be drawn from the group of people whom we would now regard as social workers, we need to be sure that in the course of their training attention is drawn to child development. Understanding the needs and predicaments of young persons leaving care has much to do with understanding how children behave, particularly when they have had poor experiences of family life and bad experiences from the past, which they carry as luggage when going forwards.

That is why we endorse the concern of the National Children's Bureau that the training and qualifications of personal advisers should be spelled out more clearly. Although Lord Hunt sought to reassure their Lordships that the majority of personal advisers would be drawn from among those who already work with young persons in care or leaving care, a minority of others could come from completely different walks of life. That is desirable, but some of them may be volunteers. We need to be sure that even those who volunteer to undertake the important role of personal adviser are trained and qualified to do the job. We would regard somebody as not suitable if he or she did not have appropriate training.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I warmly welcome the amendment. Would the regulations that my hon. Friend has recommended be subject to the negative or affirmative procedure?

Mrs. Spelman: As my hon. Friend knows, and as we discovered at an early stage, as parliamentarians we need to have a belt-and-braces approach. It is not enough in this instance to let things go through on the nod. That is one of the motivations behind the amendment. We feel that there is too much latitude for inadequacy in training people for the important role of personal advisers. They must be qualified and they must be suitable.

Save the Children Fund is another charity that has a real concern. It has said that there could be a situation in which a personal adviser has a conflict of interest. The example that it has given could genuinely arise. If a personal adviser is a social worker and an employee of the local authority, it is possible that he or she may be under considerable pressure to stay within a budget. That is not unusual for a local authority employee. That may compromise the preferable choice that that personal adviser would make in addressing the need of the care leaver for suitable accommodation. The fact that Save the Children Fund recognises that there is a conflict of interest should lead us all to reflect on the matter. A conflict of interest could be an important reason why someone might not be suitable for the role of personal adviser.

Another important practical consideration has come to light through the work of charitable organisations, which have a great deal of experience in this area. The National Children's Bureau has said that there is no mention in the Bill of the links between advisers of young people who are involved in other recent Government initiatives, such as the youth support scheme which will be established by the Learning and Skills Bill. There is a risk that young people may face a veritable army of advisers. For example, they could find themselves with a social worker, a personal adviser, a case supervisor, a home link worker, a foster carer and, indeed, a Connexions adviser, although that role might double up with that of personal adviser. I invite hon. Members to put themselves in the position of a vulnerable young person who has so many different people to answer to for his or her actions, to consult, to take account of and to get to know. In addition, that young person has to cope with changes in personnel as those advisers change.

It is fair to ask the Government to reassure us that the approach will be streamlined. There is a danger that an array of different people will intervene in a young person's case when it is crucial that that person does not become another statistic in a system that has failed him. The arrangements must remain personal. Young care leavers will undoubtedly view an array of such people as representing the establishment, for which they may not have the warmest regard. There is a danger that young people will feel no more cared for and supported than they were before.

We should reiterate that children have a right to expect unsuitable advisers to be screened out. I hope that the Minister will reassure us that protective measures exist in other parts of the legislation. We know that terrible mistakes have been made. In Committee, I cited the example of how, almost by chance, a local authority uncovered the fact that an employee of another local authority, who held a position of enormous trust looking after vulnerable children, had a criminal record. It took more than a year for the local authority that employed him to do anything about the fact that he was in charge of children despite having a criminal record that would render him completely unsuitable for working in close proximity with children. The criminal record was only uncovered when the individual applied to Wandsworth council to become a foster parent. The council ran the proper checks and discovered that he had a criminal record, of which Lambeth council was completely unaware. We are talking not about theory but about mistakes that happen in practice. Children were let down in that case and we must ensure that they are not let down in the same way again.

All the evidence surrounding inquiries into the running of children's services in which there have been problems has taught us that some local authorities do not have a good track record in this area. I would be the first to acknowledge that great steps have been taken to protect children. People who have contact with children should now be rigorously checked. I have first-hand experience of that because, wisely or unwisely, I volunteered to help with the Sunday school in my local parish church. I have been interested to go through the whole process that requires me to declare whether I have a criminal record,

a health reason why I should not work with children or have had a different name in the past. I even have to supply my birth certificate. I therefore know that checks are made even when an individual is volunteering, but I am nevertheless concerned about the fact that the appointment of a personal adviser relies on such checks by local authorities.

5.15 pm

During the Committee stage of the Care Standards Bill, we learned of the terrible dearth of social workers. They are in short supply, and much of the legislation that we have passed requires them to do more and more. There is a huge demand for their skill, and I should hate the need for them as social advisers to be compromised because of a shortage of time for checks to be made. The amendment will help to ensure that local authorities take seriously the process of establishing whether a person is suitable to act as an adviser.

I want to make another practical point about timing. The Minister explained in Committee how changes in the checking procedure could be helpful, but there is no doubt that there will be a time lag between the establishment of the Criminal Records Bureau and local authorities needing to know whether someone is suitable, and has passed the police checks.

On 26 October, a ministerial answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) suggested that the new bureau would be in a position to issue criminal records certificates by around July next year, but the Minister involved said that detailed planning was continuing. That leaves a bit of doubt in my mind. I know that the time is coming, but the needs of care leavers have been clearly identified and the role of personal adviser is key to the success of this part of the Bill. There must be a huge temptation to get the system going, perhaps before the establishment of the very best protection which we hope will be afforded in future. I should like the Minister to reassure me that there will be no gap during which unsuitable persons might be appointed.

We understand how crucial advisers are to the workability of the system. I cannot emphasise that enough. They will be responsible for ensuring that care leavers' pathway plans develop and for adjusting those plans to young persons' changing needs. An adviser will have a close relationship, involving trust and understanding, with a vulnerable care leaver. Advisers will represent the human face of what I have described as the corporate parent. As I said earlier, as a corporate parent we have not done very well in the past in relation to the group that we are discussing.

If the Minister is receptive to our amendment, we shall, I hope, help to remove elements of risk that might cause unsuitable people to gain a position of influence, and to aggravate an already bad situation. A number of care leavers fall through the net, causing the sad statistics that I cited earlier. They may become unemployed, they often become homeless, some become pregnant, and some have young children.

We tabled a similar amendment in Committee, but the Minister rejected it, saying that the Government did not want to be too prescriptive and wanted to leave the matter to the discretion of local authorities. As I hope I have made clear, we remain anxious about the discretion of local authorities. We feel that our amendment would strengthen the Bill and would leave less room for manoeuvre.

One of our major concerns with the Bill is that we have to take quite a lot of it on trust. The Government stated that they would resolve the matter that we are concerned about through statutory guidance, but the question is: what will that be? We do not know. It is yet another example of an empty box. We are being asked to agree the contents without having seen them.

We were invited by the Minister to help him to ensure that the guidance was correct. How can we do that without knowing what it is? Perhaps we shall hear what it is and perhaps that will give us some reassurance. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) for the spirit in which she has moved her amendment. She started by saying that we all had to remind ourselves about the nature, scope and range of the Bill. That is true for those on the Government Benches, as I am sure it is true for those on the Conservative Benches. A long time has elapsed between the Committee stage of the Bill and Report. We all know the reasons for that, but the hon. Lady showed her customary grasp of the detail. I congratulate her on that.

The hon. Lady is right to say that there is a powerful sense of deja vu about the debate: she made exactly the same speech in Standing Committee. I do not want to antagonise her, but my response is likely to be similar to my response to her amendments then, although I shall try to deal specifically with the particular reassurances and assurances that she asked me to give in relation to two particular concerns. One was about the relationship between the young person's adviser and the Connexions service that the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health strongly support and encourage. The other was about the progress of the Criminal Records Bureau and the facility that local authorities will have to check the names of potential young persons advisers against the database that the bureau will maintain.

As I said in Standing Committee, the hon. Lady's argument with the Government is one of process rather than substance. I do not think that her argument is one of substance in relation to the role of young persons advisers, their training, qualifications and suitability to do the job. As I understand it, her argument is essentially that she would prefer those issues to be dealt with by regulations—she is right; if we took that action it would be subject to the negative procedure—instead of setting the procedures for appointing young persons advisers and the detail around that in guidance.

The hon. Lady was slightly wrong to say that I suggested in Standing Committee that all those matters would be left purely to the discretion of local authorities because, as she went on rightly to say, I made it clear that we intended to issue statutory guidance to local authorities on how that discretion should be exercised. Of course, that is guidance that local authorities are required to follow. We are aware, as she is, that substantial issues of policy and consistency need to be addressed around the appointment of that new person—the young person's adviser—who will have, as she rightly said, an important and substantial role in overseeing the implementation of the new arrangements.

[Mr. John Hutton]

What is clear—I agree with the hon. Lady—is that the young person's adviser must be able to build the right relationship of trust with young people. The Government believe that there is no monopoly of those skills and characteristics in any given professional group, or in the public, private or voluntary sectors. In our consultation document entitled "Me, Survive, Out There?" we produced a fairly comprehensive and long list of people who could potentially act as young persons advisers. We must allow for flexibility in the system, so that individual needs and circumstances can be best met.

I believe—I made it clear in Standing Committee and I repeat it—that that is not a suitable matter for regulation, but that statutory guidance is a better mechanism to build in the flexibility that we want. We shall be clear that we envisage a wide field for potential young persons advisers and that the critical point in each case will be whether they are able to work successfully with the individual young person. I believe—it is a matter of common sense, and I am sure that this is where most Members would want to draw the line—that those judgments about suitability are best made through local recruitment and selection processes.

As for defining groups that may not be young persons advisers, that issue has been largely overtaken by the Protection of Children Act 1999, which, subsequent to our discussions in Standing Committee, became law on 2 October.

The hon. Lady was right to say that it is important that vulnerable young people, such as those who have been looked after, should be protected from unsuitable people. I am confident that the legislation will do that. We have taken account of that need and safeguards are already in place—such as police checks, to which the hon. Lady referred and about which I shall say a few words in a moment, and the provisions of the 1999 Act.

We do not envisage that young persons advisers will be recruited to specialise in different age bandings. Indeed, the ideal will be that a young person keeps the same young persons adviser from 16 to 21, or whenever he or she stops receiving support from his or her responsible authority. Consequently, young persons advisers must be able to work with the entire age range, and recruitment will have to take account of the safeguards in place to prevent unsuitable people from working with children. Therefore, I do not think that there is any need to make separate regulations for that purpose as amendment No. 11 invites the House to do.

The hon. Lady asked two specific questions and expressed a particular concern about the Connexions personal advisers. The role of the Connexions personal adviser and that of the adviser appointed under the Bill clearly will be largely similar. It is proposed, therefore, that the advisers for young people aged 16 and over living in and leaving care should usually be their Connexions adviser.

The precise nature of the relationship between the employing authority—for example, a social services department—and the Connexions service is still a matter for consideration. We are examining the details of that relationship. Additionally, proposals are being developed for a major training programme for Connexions advisers, to include those who are appointed as advisers for the purposes of the Bill.

As for the training of young persons advisers who are not going to be Connexions advisers, we made it clear in the "Me, Survive, Out There?" document that local authorities would be able to use an element of their children's special grant—the quality protects money—to ensure that young persons advisers receive the training that we all know they need to receive.

The project remains on target for the Criminal Records Bureau to begin issuing greater numbers of certificates by about July 2001. Meanwhile, the Home Office is examining possible methods of minimising delays in local police forces. I think that it is very important, for reasons that the hon. Lady has rightly identified, that police checks are conducted as expeditiously as possible. That is a basic safeguard which we expect to be in place.

I hope that the hon. Lady is reassured by the particular responses that I have made on the Criminal Records Bureau and the Connexions advisory service. She is less likely to be satisfied with my arguments on why we prefer to deal with the matter in statutory guidance rather than in regulations. However, I think that it would be wrong to characterise statutory guidance as an ineffective tool. It is not ineffective—it has proven its worth on many occasions and in many settings in which Governments of all persuasions have used the section 7 route to provide guidance to local authorities.

The hon. Lady asked me specifically about how she could know whether the guidance would be appropriate. The fact is that the guidance is not yet ready. If it were, we would certainly let her see it, so that she and her right hon. and hon. Friends could comment on it. I meant what I said in Committee: when the guidance is ready, we shall certainly seek her view and that of other Conservative Members on the appropriateness of that guidance tool. We shall do that not because of nostalgia or sentiment, but because it is the right thing to do.

We want to ensure that consensus on the Bill is maintained. The hon. Lady identified consensus as one of the strong characteristics of our proposals and we are anxious to maintain that. I am sure that she will not mind me saying, however, that we do not think that Conservative Members necessarily have a monopoly on wisdom in the matter. She said that I asked her to help out, but I think that she might have misinterpreted that, as we have very strong ideas about what we want the guidance to cover. Nevertheless, we should certainly welcome her advice and opinions and those of other Conservative Members.

I therefore cannot recommend my right. hon. and hon. Friends to accept amendment No. 11. However, I hope that the hon. Lady has at least been reassured about our intentions on maintaining proper and effective safeguards and that the legitimate points she has made on training and suitability will be properly dealt with in the guidance that we shall be issuing.

Mrs. Spelman: I am grateful to hear the Minister's clear reassurance that there will be some streamlining in the number of advisers who will be working with vulnerable young people and his identification of funds to finance additional training. I have been reassured on both those points.

5.30 pm

There would have been no need to debate the amendment had we seen the draft guidance. One of the problems throughout our consideration of the Bill has been that quite a lot of detailed background information has not been available. Of course, three months have elapsed since we debated the Bill in Committee, but I hope that this evening's debate, which has highlighted some of the Opposition's concerns, will serve to inform the Government as they draft the guidance, to which we wish to contribute by dint of their invitation to us.

To be realistic, we are unlikely to see any draft guidance until it is pretty well in its final stage, so perhaps tonight's debate has served the purpose of enabling us to make a contribution, even if we have reiterated some of the points that we made earlier this year. We feel that they are important and we look forward to seeing the draft guidance. As we have had some reassurances on streamlining, funding and training, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 2

ADDITIONAL FUNCTIONS OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN RESPECT OF CERTAIN CHILDREN.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 4, line 30, at end insert—

'23CA.—(1) Any person aged eighteen or over who makes a valid election not to be treated as a former relevant child shall not, so long as such an election is in force, be a former relevant child for the purposes of this section.

(2) The Secretary of State may by regulations make provision as to the procedure for the making and withdrawal of elections under subsection 1.

(3) In respect of a person in respect of whom a valid election is in force, a local authority shall not discharge any of the duties in subsections (2) and (3) of section 23C.

(4) Subject to subsection (1C), a local authority may in respect of any person in respect of whom a valid election is in force offer services or assistance of a type required or permitted to be provided under this Act to former relevant children, but shall be under no duty to do so.'.

I cannot allow the Bill to progress without raising what I believe to be an important issue, although in anticipation of what the Minister will say, I have to confess that we debated the matter on Second Reading and in Committee.

The Bill originally focused on children aged 16 and 17. During its passage through the House its scope has been considerably extended to place on local authorities all sorts of duties in relation to people over 18 who left care before reaching that age. We have broadly supported the Government in those changes to the Bill. Indeed, our noble Friends were partly instrumental in making the changes in the other place. However, I fear that in their enthusiasm to ensure that the Government facilitated proper support for care leavers over 18, those in the other place may have lost sight of a rather important and fundamental principle: when we talk about people over 18, we are dealing not with children but with adults who have to be treated as people capable of making decisions for themselves, with all the respect that that implies.

In his reply to the previous debate, the Minister spoke about his desire to build a consensus around this and other measures that seek to protect children. We fully support that view, but I would suggest to him that to be durable, a consensus must be not merely a consensus between the different views represented in this place at any particular time, but must sit comfortably with the traditions of our legal system.

The Bill places on local authorities a requirement to maintain pathway plans in respect of former relevant children—people who were relevant children when they left care and who are now over 18. It also requires local authorities to keep in touch with former relevant children and to re-establish contact with them if that contact has been lost. I acknowledge, as I have done before, that that would be a positive measure for the vast majority of children leaving care and we welcome it, but upon becoming adults some children leaving care may wish to put their past behind them and sever the link with the local authority that looked after them during their childhood. The Minister may think that it is right or wrong, helpful or unhelpful, in their best interests or otherwise, but the point is surely that as adults they have that right. The intentions of others, and the outcomes, may be good, but we should not subject a singled-out group of competent adults to compulsion, simply because something is for their own good. We do that only when people's competence is in question.

The essence of the Bill is to normalise the position of care leavers as far as possible and make their treatment as close as possible to that of other, perhaps more fortunate, individuals, and not to single them out for compulsory treatment in a way that marks them apart.

Currently, we have no way of knowing how assiduous local authorities are likely to be in seeking to keep in touch with former relevant children. Without wanting to be too cynical, I must say that much may depend on the financing mechanisms yet to be announced. Local authorities may take a relatively assertive line in seeking to discharge their statutory duty to take reasonable steps to stay in touch with former relevant children and to re-establish contact if it is lost.

We raised these issues on Second Reading and in Committee, and the Government argued that an opt-out, allowing an adult who is a former relevant child to choose not to be included in the provisions, would allow some local authorities to avoid their responsibilities under the Bill. Clearly, we do not want that. A balance needs to be struck. Local authorities must not be given a route that is open to abuse, but fully competent adult care leavers who do not want to participate further in the scheme must be given the right to free themselves from contact with their social services authority. There was a consultation conference on the Government's document, "Me, Survive, Out There?". One of the comments recorded in response to a question about whether it was right to have a plan was:

> Some young people have good reason for not wanting anything more to do with Social Services. They shouldn't be forced to have a plan or maintain contact. Their decision should be respected.

We believe that that is right when we are talking not about 16 and 17-year-old children but about 18-year-old adults. The amendment would modify the statutory duty on local authorities to allow for the making of an election by an adult who is a former relevant child, in a manner to be prescribed by the Secretary of State. That is important, because it addresses the Government's legitimate concern about creating a loophole through which recalcitrant local authorities might escape. The Secretary of State would

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

prescribe the way in which the election was made, and indeed the way in which it could be withdrawn. An election in force would relieve the local authority from its obligations to maintain or re-establish contact, and to maintain a pathway plan and appoint a young person's adviser, and indeed would prevent that authority from pursuing those duties. It would not prevent them from offering other types of assistance.

I must draw attention to an error in the amendment. The reference to subsection (1C) should be a reference to subsection (3). The numbering changed between the blue and the white copy, but the subsequent reference in the amendment was not changed.

The amendment is not in any sense intended to be a wrecking amendment. It would recognise the real and important difference between the treatment of care leavers who are still children—minors—and of those who are have attained majority. In the first instance, the local authority must take on the role of the parent and discharge that duty diligently; in the second, the local authority's role is to be supportive, where such support is welcomed by the individual.

This is the third time that we have discussed this matter. I have as yet heard no case for requiring local authorities to maintain plans for, and to keep in touch with, competent adults who have expressed through a mechanism to be defined by the Secretary of State a clear wish to the contrary. The amendment would recognise the fundamental right of a competent adult to choose to be left alone by a local authority.

As I have said before to the Minister, it is imperative that the Bill be in accordance with the spirit at least of article 8 of the European convention on human rights, which gives the right to privacy and respect for family life. Therefore, a person who has attained the age of majority should be able to express a desire not to be included in the scheme proposed by the Bill.

My attempts to argue that case on two previous occasions were met with torrents of abuse—not from the Minister, but from Labour Back-Bench Members. Perhaps their absence today means that they have decided that they have lost the argument. However, nothing is more typical of the tendency to interfere and nanny people—so unhelpful in creating good and durable legislation—than this attempt to coerce competent adults into something that they may express a desire not to have.

A moment's reflection shows that it would be wrong for a local authority to monitor competent adults against their express wishes. I thought about the matter at some length over the summer recess, and could think of no circumstances in which it would be morally right to do so. I hope that the House will think carefully again about the implications of what the Bill proposes.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Fewer hon. Members are in the Chamber this evening than attended the Committee deliberations. That is clearly a measure of the general support for the Bill. At the risk of going over old ground, I want to say that I support proposed new subsection (1) of the amendment, although my argument is not that advanced by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond). Clearly, in an ideal world, an unruly 17-year-old in care can become a competent adult on his 18th birthday, but that does not square with my experience. The argument in favour of support for young people is as relevant for people of 16 as it is for those aged 18 or 19.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman presumably accepts that the law sets a watershed for people at the age of 18. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, people who attain majority are regarded as competent adults.

Dr. Brand: Clearly, I recognise the law, but perhaps my definition of competence differs from the hon. Gentleman's. According to my definition, a competent person can make well-informed decisions for himself about how to lead his life, and can do so without support. I would be worried if all parts of the amendment were accepted. The local authority would then have a licence to have nothing more to do with a particular young person. I would be as worried if parents suddenly said to their child when he or she turned 18, "Never darken our doors again; we have no interest in you." There is a great difference between the requirement to receive all one's sustenance, benefits and means of sustaining oneself from the ages of 16 to 21, as the Bill provides for leavers, and the duty of caring about the outcome of the decisions that they make in their lives.

5.45 pm

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman has just referred to 16 and 17-year-olds. We are not talking about them, but about 18-year-olds. Will he concede that an 18-year-old who wished to distance himself from his family would be entitled to expect his family not to harass him, if that was his clearly expressed wish?

Dr. Brand: Absolutely. I would not give licence to parents to harass, either. However, there is a great difference between continuing care and harassment. I hope that the Bill does not give a power to harass.

What concerns me—which is why I support the first part of the amendment—is that the powers that the Bill gives local authorities over young people who are over 18 are greater than those of the average parent. If young people are in education or are in need of benefit because they are not self-sustaining in the work place, their only means of support is not—as it is for children with parents—a benefits system into which everyone can plug, but through their local authority.

In Committee, I moved an amendment that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge described as a wrecking amendment. When young people—it does not matter to me whether they are 17, 18, 19 or 20—become disaffected with the local authority and refuse to accept its help, is there a mechanism flexible enough to ensure that they are supported in a legitimate way? That is what my amendment was designed to test with the Minister, because I am extremely concerned that when young people who cannot go to a Benefits Agency office, do not qualify for social loans and refuse to be in touch with their local authority take flight, their only means of support is through drug dealing, prostitution or stealing.

We had some discussion on this in Committee. The Minister talked about exceptional arrangements or, by regulation, listing exemption groups. However, having reread *Hansard*, I am not sure whether that exemption can

be made for individuals when the situation has broken down. Will the local authority and the Benefits Agency liaise when a young person is clearly in need of financial support, and can such support be forthcoming other than through direct contact with the local authority if the authority cannot meets its commitments, even if it wants to, because of that young person's bloody-mindedness?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) is in the classic Liberal Democrat position. He supports some parts of the amendment but not others. Unfortunately, the rules of the House do not allow him to choose which parts he supports. He either supports the whole package or he does not.

Dr. Brand: I am always happy to be rebuked and to learn, but I thought that one of the opportunities available on Report was to explore further with Ministers their approaches to amendments and the Bill. That is why I am happy to support only part of an amendment. How I will vote is a matter that will become clear should we be called on to do so.

Mr. Hutton: I look forward to finding out how the hon. Gentleman intends to vote if the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) pushes the amendment to a vote.

I must begin from where I would not choose to start by correcting the assessment of the Bill made by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge. It is not true to say that we did not envisage this part of the Bill extending to people aged 21. We always saw it that way. The argument in the other place was over whether that should be made explicit in the Bill or implemented through the regulation-making powers that we had originally said we wished to use. His description of a Bill whose character and nature had been fundamentally changed by the amendments accepted in another place is not right. As is made clear in the Bill and in the document, "Me, Survive, Out There?", we always had those points in mind.

Secondly, and more substantially, the hon. Gentleman fundamentally misunderstands this part of the Bill, and his concerns are therefore misplaced. He characterised the local authority in conducting its responsibilities as an intrusive arm of the nanny state that would harass and monitor people in some covert, police-style operation. That is completely inaccurate. We do not expect local authorities to exercise their functions and duties in that way.

We argued that point on Second Reading and in Standing Committee, and I am sad that we seem to have seen no progress in the hon. Gentleman's thinking on it over the summer. However, his friends in the other place did not raise that argument at all, although they had plenty of opportunity to do so. He seems to have got his arguments into a twist. His perfectly understandable arguments about civil liberties are misplaced.

I must also argue with the hon. Gentleman's amendment on the grounds that his attempted solution to the civil liberties deficit that he says that he has identified would be likely to make matters worse rather than better. We explored the reasons why that should be in Standing Committee, as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight has rightly said. The attempted solution might in fact operate as effective encouragement to some local authorities to make young people leaving care exercise the choice that the amendment would provide. In that case, the amendment might deny the local authority the opportunity to provide the sort of help that we would wish to vulnerable care leavers—the very people who prompted our concern to legislate.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's arguments, but they traduce the duties that we want local authorities to have for young people. He misdescribed, in particular, the way in which we expect the duty to keep in touch to operate. We shall deal with that through statutory guidance, which we intend to issue as soon as we can. We shall consult the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on the nature of that duty.

The hon. Gentleman did not address the point that we are trying to strike a balance. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight, to his credit, did mention that, and, to be fair, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge alluded partly to it. We accept that we are striking out into new territory. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge and his party had 20 years in which to address deficiencies in the system for leaving care, and did not do so. We have tried to strike a balance between the needs of young people leaving care, who are often vulnerable, socially excluded, damaged youngsters, and what we expect of a responsible parent—in this case, the local authority.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that the amendment misses the point that a vulnerable young person of 18 may want nothing to do with the local authority, which will in turn be unsurprised by that. Two years later, at the age of 20, having grown up a bit, the person may seek support. It is not unusual for 18-year-olds to leave home wanting nothing to do with their parents, but for the same people, in their early 20s, to realise that they have cut off all support and seek to return in some way. We must build into the Bill the possibility of rapprochement, should the young person want it.

Mr. Hutton: I agree. My hon. Friend may be interested to know that a recent assessment by the National Children's Bureau, which was published in September, showed that young people who have left care often admit, when they look back, that they were far less ready to live independently than they had thought at the time. Under the amendment, it might be difficult, once the young person has taken an option, for the local authority to discharge the responsibilities that we expect a good parent to deliver.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge was right to say that a competent adult may say that he or she wishes to lead his or her own life exactly as he or she chooses. The Bill will not stop any young person doing that. We are concerned with the duties that a corporate parent, acting as a good and reasonable parent, should have. The hon. Gentleman is a parent himself, and I cannot imagine that he would accept a situation in which he would make no effort to keep in touch with one of his own children should something happen that resulted in that child not wanting to remain in touch. I should certainly wish to remain in touch. No matter what the

[Mr. Hutton]

difficulties in their relationship, we should expect a parent to make some effort to keep in touch. That is a hallmark of a good parent.

The hon. Gentleman's concerns are misplaced, and he has misdescribed the nature of the duties, particularly the duty to keep in touch. He has characterised that duty as if it were some covert, police-state duty, which it clearly is not. We shall ensure that it is not when we issue statutory guidance.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): What would happen if a young adult in the pathway plan made it clear that he or she did not want contact with a local authority? Would that fit with how the pathway plan might work? Does not that point provide a response to the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond)?

Mr. Hutton: Those issues will arise, as the hon. Gentleman knows from experience. We cannot legislate for good relationships between children leaving care and local authorities. We must put in place the right framework of duties and responsibilities, and that is all that we seek to do. We expect pathway plans to be kept under regular review, and if difficulties arise, the pathway plan should reflect them. The plan can ultimately record only the agreement reached between the parties.

Mr. Hammond: I want to be clear on this point. Is the Minister suggesting that the pathway plan could provide for no further contact, which, I think, was the import of the point made by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas)?

Mr. Hutton: We should wish to ensure that the duty to keep in touch was preserved at all times. That is an extremely important principle. How it would translate into practice would vary from case to case. In some cases, a young person leading a successful, independent life may feel that minimum contact is necessary, and that could be reflected in the plans. We are not dogmatic about telephone conversations or visits every hour or every day. That would be absurd. We need to tailor arrangements to suit the particular circumstances of the young person concerned. We want flexibility. I suspect that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge is not reassured by all that, and I know that he feels strongly on these matters. I hope, however, that he will draw some comfort from the fact that we intend the arrangements to operate sensibly and realistically but in a way that achieves our fundamental objective for the Bill, which is to ensure that local authorities act in future as responsible and good parents. I argue strongly that it is characteristic of a good parent that he or she should at least try to keep in touch with a child.

Mr. Hammond: I have listened carefully to the Minister. He and I approach the problem from fundamentally different points of view, but I acknowledge, as I hope he would, that we are both well-intentioned.

The Minister referred to the pathway plan of an individual who was leading a successful, independent life, saying that it might propose minimum contact. In whose view would that life be successful? It is the local authority's view. It draws up the pathway plan. That is precisely the point. It is the nanny approach. The local authority will decide when, if and how one is entitled to break free.

6 pm

The Minister is not correct when he characterises my position as that of having misunderstood the Bill. I understand it well and I agree with him that, whatever it states, it will not prevent young people from going their own way—probably successfully—if that is what they want.

As the Bill is drafted, the local authority will retain a statutory obligation to use its reasonable endeavours to maintain or re-establish contact with the young person. It will retain a statutory obligation to appoint a young person's adviser. The young person's adviser for all those who have gone away and asserted their rights to be completely independent will have a good job because he will not be busy. There will also be a statutory obligation to maintain and update the pathway plan for the young person. Essentially, in the case of someone who has clearly stated his intention to set himself apart from the process, as the Minister has acknowledged young people will de facto be able to do, the local authority should be relieved of its statutory obligation to continue to do all those things laid down in clause 2 and, in case there are over zealous local authorities, should be prevented from pursuing aggressively—not all authorities would do so, but some might—the person in question.

The Minister got himself a little confused when he suggested that his resistance to the amendment was based in part on his desire to avoid abuse by local authorities. At one stage he told us that he did not want to create a mechanism that would allow local authorities to encourage individuals to make an election that would prevent the authority from providing the advice and support that it would like to provide to the young person. If authorities want to provide that, they will scarcely encourage the young person to make an election. I am not persuaded by the Minister's argument. We come at the problem from fundamentally different points of view.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) made a good point. I hope that we have dealt with it through the proposal that an election could be withdrawn as well as made. A young person who changed his or her mind would not be permanently excluded from the system.

I take exception to the Minister's remark that it took us 20 years in government to protect children effectively. He may want to remind himself of the date of the Children Act—1989—which is, I think, by consensus the basic building block from which we start. Indeed, the architecture of the Bill builds upon that Act. Most hon. Members—I include the Minister—have sought, in debates on this Bill and on others, to emphasise the consensual nature of most of what we do in the House for children.

Of course, the Minister was right to say that the regulations will determine the substance of the matter that I have raised. If they are drafted in such a way as to ensure that local authorities do not pursue individuals who express a clear wish to break free and they do not give authorities incentives to pursue people whom they should not pursue, the practical effect that I am seeking will be achieved. Therefore, although we have to disagree, I am

mindful of the Minister's reassertion today of his commitment to consult with Conservative Members and hon. Members from other parties to produce those regulations.

I will withdraw the amendment and thus spare the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) the embarrassment of having to decide which part of it is most important to him. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mrs. Spelman: I beg to move amendment No. 2, in page 5, line 2, at end insert—

'( ) The assistance given under subsection (4)(a) and (b) may be subject to such conditions regarding adherence by the former relevant child to his pathway plan as the local authority shall reasonably determine.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 3, in clause 4, page 7, line 39, at end insert—

'in accordance with his pathway plan'.

No. 4, in page 7, line 44, after "training", insert—

'in accordance with his pathway plan'.

No. 5, in page 7, line 46, at end insert—

'in accordance with his pathway plan'.

Mrs. Spelman: The amendments are a matter of common sense from the perspective of the corporate parent. The compliance with the pathway plan that we want to achieve will be instrumental in the effectiveness of the Bill.

All eligible relevant and former relevant children and young people must have a pathway plan under the Bill. It will take over from their existing care plan and will run at least until they are 21, covering education, training, career plans and help needed, for example, to move into supported lodgings. Regulations may be made on the review of pathway plans, but it is envisaged that they will be reviewed only every six months.

Having reflected on the matter since the Bill was in Committee in July, we have decided that, from the perspective of the corporate parent and given all the effort and resources that go into drawing up a pathway plan, we need to ensure that it is adhered to. If the Bill is not strengthened in that way, a more minimalist attitude towards compliance with this part of the Bill may result.

This is a classic role for a corporate parent. Many hon. Members will be in a similar position—seeing their children go on to further and higher education and becoming heavily involved in the cost. Parents are diligent in reassuring themselves that their money is spent on the purpose for which it was intended. Many of us who went through further and higher education remember our parents holding us to account about what we had done with the money—not necessarily every penny, but we certainly had to reassure them that we were following the course that we had together agreed. Sometimes, child and parent face the difficult decision to change course halfway through. Changing our minds had consequences—the implications might have been to increase the financial load on the parent. It is no different for corporate parents.

We want to encourage vulnerable young people to obtain educational qualifications. Statistics show that they are often very short of such qualifications. One of the purposes of the pathway plan is for the young person's adviser and the care leaver to agree together the appropriate development plan. There is little point in all that activity if the young person is simply allowed to depart from the plan. Such a departure might go undetected if the review does not take place more frequently than once every six months.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): The hon. Lady's colleague, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), asked who were the local authority to judge whether a pathway plan had been successful. He accused the Government of acting like the nanny state. The amendment seems to state that we must judge failure. Is that not a contradictory perspective? If we say what is successful, we are being the nanny state, but if we judge something to be a failure, we are not.

Mrs. Spelman: We do not want to use labels as brutal as "success" or "failure" for this group of young people. Statistics show that 15 per cent. of them are unemployed and 75 per cent. do not have educational qualifications. On the face of it, that looks like failure if one is putting it baldly, but it will not be particularly helpful to attach that tag to such vulnerable young people.

The amendment's purpose, of which the hon. Gentleman seems to have lost sight, is to assist the young person's adviser to see through the investment made jointly with the vulnerable young individual—let us not talk of success or failure—so that the individual keeps on the agreed course. One of our concerns is that as a review is planned only once every six months, much could come unstitched. I invite the hon. Gentleman to think back to his own further or higher education—during a six-month period much can happen to a young person.

The amendment will help the young person's adviser to take a proactive approach to the implementation of the pathway plan. That is not to say that that would not entail change. If we consider the matter realistically, young people often make their choices quite late in the day, at short notice and so on. My understanding of the explanatory notes supporting the concept of pathway plans is that that is all perfectly possible within the role that the personal adviser would have under the plan.

Such changes should, however, be agreed, just as they would be discussed by a parent and child, who were looking together at further or higher education—as I pointed out. Such changes might be made when young people who had completed one term of a course in a further or higher education establishment came to the conclusion that, at the end of one term, or even after half a term, the course was absolutely not for them. Such occurrences are not unusual.

As matters stand, if the young person's adviser was unable to undertake a review more often than once every six months, half an academic year would be lost. That is important in relation to further education choices. Such courses may last for only two years, so a quarter of that potential for academic furtherance could be lost.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Given the spirit of the hon. Lady's remarks, does she also argue that her proposal would help the young person's adviser to put pressure on a local authority to provide resources for a young person who was following the pathway plan?

Mrs. Spelman: There is no dispute about the Bill placing a duty on local authorities to provide assistance,

[Mrs. Spelman]

but having given public money—both to support the role of the young person's adviser and for the whole process of working together to produce a suitable plan for the young person's development, training and furtherance—it is perfectly reasonable for that local authority to determine whether the assistance is correctly applied and whether benefit is being gained from it. The amendment is clear on that point.

Dr. Brand: I seek clarification. I understand that if the relevant child is receiving money for education or training needs that are not being taken up, there may be an argument for withdrawing the money. However, does the hon. Lady really suggest that

assistance of the kind referred to in section 24B(2), to the extent that his welfare . . . needs require it

is included under her amendment? If so, that would worry me greatly.

Mrs. Spelman: Welfare is difficult to define precisely, although of course it must be the paramount concern. The focus of our amendment is on consistency between the pathway plan on education and employment choices and what the young person actually pursues. That is a perfectly reasonable position for the corporate parent to adopt and one that a young person will meet in later life. There is accountability for money spent on, or invested in, a person—whether in a business or public service context. There is accountability for resources invested to pursue a particular path of development. It is wholly reasonable that the authority committing those resources should ensure that the outcome reflects the agreed purpose of the initial commitment.

6.15 pm

There will always be accidents, in education or employment, when young people begin a particular course of action and, for good reasons—such as a course being wrapped up for lack of participants—do not complete it. In my constituency, I have encountered that. However, such cases are in the minority; we do not want to multiply them, but to add strength to the Bill and to tighten the role and responsibilities of the adviser.

The amendment, which is a small but important alteration to the Bill, will ensure consistency between the pathway plan and the eventual outcome for the care leaver, to the benefit of that young person. It will increase the responsibility of the adviser to follow up the agreed course of action and to be satisfied that it is being pursued. It is very much in the interests of the welfare of the young person. The amendment is a practical and realistic proposal; it will help to improve the Bill's effectiveness in practice.

Mr. Hutton: This amendment and amendment No. 1 demonstrate some of the turmoil and tension among Conservative Members as to whether they want to take a libertarian view on these matters or whether they are more in favour of the control freak tendency view on the power and role of the state. Amendment No. 1 would have allowed young people to opt out of the arrangements altogether; amendment No. 2 would enforce their compliance with arrangements.

I want to reassure the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on one or two points on the way that we envisage the operation of the legislation. I hope that then she will not feel the need to push the argument further.

In essence, as I understand her arguments today and during our Standing Committee debates, she and her hon. Friends are concerned that the pathway plan will represent a one-sided bargain and that it will require the local authority to make available significant resources and other support, care and assistance to a young person who might either choose to disregard the terms of the pathway plan or fail in some way to comply with it. That would thus be an unacceptable use of public money and would not encourage the rights and responsibilities that we think necessary in this matter. We are talking about a good parent and the children for whom that parent has responsibility.

The pathway plans will not be one-sided bargains. I make that clear to the hon. Lady and her hon. Friends. There are responsibilities and rights in this matter. They need to be addressed and we intend to do that.

As the hon. Lady knows, the pathway plan will set out whatever assistance—for example, with education, training or employment—the responsible authority agrees to provide. The young person's adviser will keep in touch with the young person. There will continue to be reviews of the pathway plan—at least every six months—but a review can, of course, be initiated either by the young person or by the council itself.

If the council became aware that a young person was not complying with his or her plan—either because he was abusing the council's support or for some other reason—of course the council would be able to call a review and, if necessary, to revise the terms of the plan. We intend that type of rolling revision to happen. It is one of the reasons that a young person's adviser would keep in touch with the young person and one of the factors that would determine the level of contact that he and the young person would wish to maintain.

The amendment would affect former relevant children—young people aged 18 and over. Those young people will no longer be dependent on their responsible authority for accommodation and maintenance, because those duties—as the hon. Lady is aware—cease when the young people turn 18. The assistance for that group of young people, therefore, will consist of help with employment, education, training or general matters. Such help will normally be agreed between the young person and the responsible authority and will be given for specific purposes.

Councils are under a duty to provide such assistance to the extent that someone's welfare or his educational and training needs require it. If someone is not co-operating with the council, the council will be entitled to consider that his welfare does not require that assistance. That is hardly, therefore, a blank cheque. A pathway plan, setting out such assistance, will be reviewed regularly and as frequently as necessary. Clearly, that is not a licence for former relevant children to stay in bed all day—that is what the hon. Lady seemed to suggest—while limitless funds flow into their bank accounts. That is not likely to happen and it is certainly not what we intend. There is therefore no need to make specific provision in the Bill for that eventuality.

Amendments Nos. 3 to 5 would affect councils' powers—not duties—to help care leavers under section 24 of the Children Act 1989. The amendments seem to reflect some confusion and I bring that to the hon. Lady's attention. Of course, it is true that section 24 can still apply to former relevant children, but the proposed new section 23C sets out councils' duties to that group. In essence, the proposed new section 23C translates councils' section 24 powers to assist into duties to former relevant children. Section 24 will, therefore, apply in practice to care leavers who do not qualify for the new arrangements because, for example, they do not meet the eligibility rules that we will set out. That being so, I am sure that it is obvious to the hon. Lady that such care leavers will not have pathway plans and that it would be wrong for any help that they receive under section 24 to be contingent on their conforming to the plans. If they did, it would be perverse and unjustifiable.

We spent some time on this matter in Committee. I hope that I have been able to set at least one or two of the issues straight. We want very much for the new arrangements to work in the context of a relationship based around rights and responsibilities. I hope that my remarks will, to some extent, reassure the hon. Lady about the issues that she has raised.

Mrs. Spelman: I assure the Minister that there is no turmoil among Conservative Members, and there was no confusion until he started speaking. Although I shall ask for clarification on one point, I was pleased to hear that he understands exactly what we were driving at, something about which there is absolutely no confusion. We wish to strike a balance between rights and responsibilities. He used exactly the same language in that respect, and there is a clear consensus on that point. I accept that he does not take a one-sided view of this issue.

I take on board as a comfort the Minister's point that a review every six months will, in practice, mean a rolling revision process. However, such a process will have cost implications. As we are unsure about whether resources will be made available to make it successful, I underline to the Minister the fact that local authorities will consider the increased burden presented by rolling revision as a practical matter of resources.

I seek clarification on something that the Minister said. He seemed to suggest that if a care leaver did not co-operate or comply, the council could be right to assume that his welfare did not require support. If I understand him correctly, his point will not give comfort to the hon. Members for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) and for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand). However, I wish to point out to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight that our amendment No. 2 deliberately did not refer to subsection (4)(c), because we are interested in adherence in relation to education and employment. We are sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's point. However, I am left with the distinct impression—unless I am very confused on the matter—that the Minister said that the council could assume that the care leaver's welfare no longer required support if he did not comply with the agreement established with the personal adviser in the plan. Will the Minister help me on that point?

Mr. Hutton: I shall certainly try to help the hon. Lady. I tried to make the position clear and she can examine my remarks in *Hansard*. It is important that she understands that the issue will be addressed as part of the rights and responsibilities agenda that I have described. I do not want to be prescriptive about individual cases, and I am sure that she will understand that. However, the degree and extent of compliance with a pathway plan and a local authority's obligation to provide support for training and the other issues identified in the Bill are bound to be connected.

Mrs. Spelman: We may be reaching a degree of consensus on this point. I shall read *Hansard* carefully tomorrow, but the Minister has probably articulated the points that we were driving at in our amendments. My reading tomorrow will make the matter much clearer, but the Minister sought to finesse his reply. I think that I understand it correctly when I suggest that the balance of rights and responsibilities that we sought in our amendment is the same balance that he seeks to achieve. For that reason, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 4

ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE FOR CERTAIN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS AGED 16 OR OVER

Mr. Hutton: I beg to move amendment No. 13, in page 6, line 25, leave out "registered" and insert "private".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 14, 20, 19 and 21 to 23.

Mr. Hutton: I am rather sorry that I have to move the amendments. They are necessary only because the Care Standards Act 2000 received Royal Assent before this Bill and we had assumed that this Bill would reach the statute book first. I assure the House that the amendments are technical.

The Care Standards Act amended the definitions of residential care homes, nursing homes and registered children's homes to care homes, independent hospitals and private children's homes. I am sure that the hon. Members for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) and for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) will remember the debate on that point—I will never be able to forget it. This Bill, in restating section 24 of the Children Act 1989, deployed in the proposed new sections 24(2)(d)(ii) and 24C(2)(c) the existing definitions of such homes because it was introduced ahead of the Care Standards Bill.

Amendments updating those references were made to the Children Act in the Committee considering the Care Standards Act. As I said at the time, those amendments were drafted on the reasonable assumption that the amendments to the Children Act made by the Children (Leaving Care) Bill would become law first. In the event and as we all know, that did not happen so the amendments refer to new sections of the Children Act that did not, in fact, exist at the time the Care Standards Act obtained Royal Assent. The consequence is that the amendments have no effect. We therefore need to amend this Bill to bring the references to such homes into line, and to remove the now incorrect amendments to the Care Standards Act.

[Mr. Hutton]

I hope that I can assure the House that the amendments are simply technical: they have no new policy implications of any kind. They are necessary simply because the Care Standards Act received Royal Assent before this Bill.

Mr. Hammond: This is a complex series of amendments to achieve, as the Minister said, precisely nothing in policy terms. We are happy that they achieve their technical purpose and do it well.

I am moved to pass a comment because in the previous debate the Minister felt able to remark on the turmoil, as he saw it, among Conservative Members. What turmoil is going on among Labour Members that enables a Minister of the Crown to say, "We were assuming that the Children (Leaving Care) Bill would reach the statute book first"? Who are the "we" who made that assumption? The "we" have to be the Government. Presumably, the Government could determine which of those two measures reached the statute book first.

6.30 pm

It is a bit rich for the Minister to say that the Government drafted the Bill on the reasonable assumption that one Bill would reach the statute book before the other and that the Bill must now be amended otherwise it would not make sense because, by implication, someone else arranged that that would happen the other way around. If any turmoil is being revealed, it is that which lies at the heart of the Government's management of their overcrowded legislative programme.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 14, in page 6, line 31, leave out from "any" to second "or" in line 32 and insert—

'care home or independent hospital'.—*[Mr. Hutton.]*

Mr. Hutton: I beg to move amendment No. 15, in page 8, line 11, after "full-time" insert "further or".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 16 to 18.

Mr. Hutton: We all know by now that the Bill is all about improving the life chances of young people who have been in care. Of course, education is the best way to do that—helping them into jobs, careers and a fulfilling and productive role in society. Skills and knowledge are now the commanding heights of the new economy. We want looked-after children to have exactly the same opportunities to receive a good education as anyone else. That is why the Bill is assiduous in creating duties to help with education and training even beyond the point at which young people leave care.

The new duties for qualifying care leavers aged 18 and over specifically include a duty on councils to assist with education and training to the end of the agreed course, even if that takes a young person past the age of 21. The Bill, as originally drafted, backed that up with a new duty to provide vacation accommodation for care leavers in higher education. That duty was introduced because we were aware of cases in which young people who had left care were unable to take up university places simply because they could not find somewhere to live during vacations. That is why the duty applies to all care leavers, not just those to whom the rest of the Bill applies.

While the Bill has being making its passage through Parliament, we have been made aware of the fact that vacation accommodation can be an issue for some further education students as well. I am grateful to those who have drawn our attention to what might have been an omission in the Bill's drafting.

For the most part, students take further education courses near to home at their local school or college, usually studying from home. Those students do not usually have special accommodation needs during vacations, and these amendments do not affect them. However, some agricultural, horticultural and arts courses are run at residential colleges and those students are clearly in the same position as many university students during vacations in needing to find alternative accommodation. Therefore, following the representations made in Committee and elsewhere, we have decided explicitly to extend the duty to provide vacation accommodation to care leavers who require it to those further education students as well.

Under amendment No. 18, the Secretary of State will be allowed to make regulations defining further education for the purposes of the Bill and the intention is to define it in terms of the sort of residential FE courses that I have described.

Amendment No. 16 will add the qualifier

because his term time accommodation is not available to him

to establish the reason why a student would need to call on that duty. Most students have the option to return to their family home during vacations—an option that is not available to care leavers. These amendments are intended to create a more level playing field by ensuring that care leavers are not left with nowhere to go during vacations.

Mrs. Spelman: I have hung on the Minister's every word because this parliamentary occasion is a first for me. I have seen the Bill through Committee to Report and, as an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, I have articulated the need to amend the Bill to include further education. Therefore, I was interested to find out how the Government would handle the fact that the Opposition had previously drawn their attention to the need for such an amendment. In the human transactional way of things, I suppose that what the Minister has said is the closest that we will get to an apology.

The Opposition first brought the proposal to the Government's attention in Committee, where they rebuffed it but, on reflection, they have now accepted it. That is an important point for the Opposition. Hon. Members on both sides of the House will know that an Opposition make great play of an amendment being accepted in Committee. We go to the country and say, "Hooray, draft legislation has been changed because we brought something to the Government's attention."

Therefore, it is disappointing that the official Opposition have not been given adequate credit. The Minister spoke of those who had made him aware of the matter, but the word "those" refers to me. Others may have been involved, but the fact is that I and my hon. Friends tabled the amendment in Committee, and we should have liked to have heard about that. Obviously, the most important point is that the change has been made.

I do not wish to embarrass the Minister too much but in Committee, he said that further education accommodation was

not a significant problem . . . New express duties are not required.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 13 July 2000; c. 110-11.]

He also said that any adjustment would be made "through additional guidance."

I rejoice at a parliamentary occasion on which, for once, we have achieved a change in the Bill. That is important because much of the Bill represents an empty box and the Opposition have had to depend on the guidance that is produced to understand its implications. We welcome the amendment because the label on the box will be clear to everyone.

For the benefit of hon. Members who were not present at the initial debate in Committee on the need to include further education, let me emphasise that only 1.1 per cent. of care leavers enter higher education and, therefore, the requirement on the local authority or the corporate parent—the term that we chose to use—to provide vacation accommodation will be taken up by a small percentage of care leavers. Of course we should like more care leavers to enter higher education, but the reality is that a far larger percentage enter further education. The Minister said in Committee that 40 per cent. do so.

The amendment represents an important change in the Bill, which is why we welcome it strongly. As I said, this is the first parliamentary occasion on which I have had such an experience, but I should have preferred credit to be given in the right quarter. I have no doubt that other organisations brought to the Minister's attention the need to include higher and further education, but the official Opposition tabled the original amendment, which was rebuffed in Committee. It would have been nice if the apology had been fulsome, but I welcome the change. It was certainly part of our policy ambition that further education should be included and there is no doubt that a much higher percentage of care leavers will benefit from the provision than would have been the case if the Bill had not been amended.

Dr. Brand: I certainly welcome the amendment and share the delight of the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) in having had some output from the many hours that we spent in Committee. It is important to make residential provision available not only for particular courses but for people living in isolated or rural areas. I gave specific examples in Committee, as did the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas). Therefore, I totally support the Government's change of mind. I hope that it will achieve a tremendous amount; it is probably the one proposal that will make a real difference to the life chances of young people leaving care and help to encourage them into the further education that they need.

Mr. Shaw: I very much welcome the amendments. It will be quite a challenge for local authorities to implement plans before a course starts for a young person who will need accommodation during a vacation. In order to complete a course, one certainly needs to know where one will live during the summer. We do not want a young person to approach the end of term saying, "I've nowhere to live; I'd better ring the council." With the best will in the world, no council would say, "There's the accommodation; we've sorted it out immediately."

The remarks of the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) were not particularly fair to my hon. Friend the Minister. On a number of occasions during proceedings in the Committees considering this Bill and the Care Standards Bill—the hon. Lady and I served on both Committees—my hon. Friend conceded points, sought further information to reassure her and the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), and changed the Bill as a result of amendments that they had tabled. For example, during proceedings on the Care Standards Bill, the hon. Gentleman made a point about including residential schools, and my hon. Friend immediately responded and made the necessary changes.

We ought to recognise that, as has been said, further rather than higher education is the principal route at the moment for most of the young people about whom we are talking. We hope that, as a result of the Bill, more such young people will enter higher education.

In July, my hon. Friend the Minister met a young man, Mark Kane, who was a care leaver, in further education and a member of the board of management for Kent county council's 16-plus service. He was a strong and passionate voice for care leavers throughout the county. He had not always received the best deal in services but, rather than be angry for himself, he chose to channel his energy into something positive to bring about changes for young people. He was very much a positive role model for many young people leaving the care system in Kent.

Sadly, on 26 September, Mark Kane took his own life, leaving his friends, social workers and all those who were associated with him devastated. He was a young man who had great hopes and someone to whom we thought we could point as a success of the care system. Despite his confident persona, that articulate young man clearly had difficulties and problems, which resulted in such a tragedy. He would very much have welcomed the amendment, as he would the whole Bill. I had a couple of opportunities to discuss the Bill with him. I hope that its powers will serve as a campaign in Kent in his memory. The amendments are very welcome.

Mr. Simon Thomas: I shall be more generous in my thanks to the Minister than the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman. The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) was correct in saying that she and the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) tabled in Committee the original amendment, which the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) and I were delighted to support. The Government have listened and tabled the necessary amendments, and that is welcome. They do not have an excellent reputation for listening to rural voices at the moment, but on this point they have done so.

The point that I made in Committee was not just about vocational courses, such as those offered in Aberystwyth, where the foremost agricultural college happens to be located, which I know many students travel some distance to attend. If rural-based students are to access the best courses, including vocational ones, they will need to travel. Some of my constituents travel 60 miles to Carmarthen, for example, in order to undertake the right vocational course, which means that they must stay there during the week. There are obligations to provide vacational accommodation for such people, and I am pleased that the Government have listened on that point.

[Mr. Simon Thomas]

In Committee, the Minister had the unenviable task of trying to defend shades of difference between further and higher education, when his Government are in fact increasingly blurring the distinctions. Certainly in Wales, with the abolition of training and enterprise councils and the establishment of a new sixth-form system of education over the next few years, we shall see the difference between further and higher education alter greatly.

Care leavers' access to such education will change too. I would imagine that one aim of the Bill is to encourage more care leavers to access both further and higher education. We must acknowledge further education as the route, on occasions, into higher education, particularly for care leavers who may have fewer GCSEs, and so forth, to start with.

The amendment is essential, and I am pleased that the Government have listened. The Bill will be seen, certainly in rural areas, as stronger as a result, ensuring that there are not more examples of rural social exclusion about which, on occasion, we must argue.

6.45 pm

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to all hon. Members who have spoken on the amendment and for the support that they have expressed for the changes that we are making. Obviously, I am less than pleased with the comments of the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), but I dare say that I will get over that. I say to her and her hon. Friends that this is probably not one of those occasions on which we should worry so much about who should take credit for the changes. The important issue is that the Bill will be amended.

I acknowledged the comments and arguments put to us. We have listened to those observations, and changed the Bill accordingly. That is the right, responsible way for Governments to act. We have tried to discharge our responsibilities seriously and fairly, and I hope that, as the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) said, the Bill has been strengthened as a result.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 16, in page 8, line 12, after "vacation" insert—

'because his term-time accommodation is not available to him then'.

No. 17, in page 8, line 14, leave out "then" and insert "during the vacation".

No. 18, in page 8, line 18, leave out ""full-time higher education"" and insert—

'"full-time", "further education", "higher education"'.

No. 20, in page 8, line 31, leave out "registered" and insert "private".

No. 19, in page 8, line 35, leave out from "any" to "or" in line 36 and insert—

'care home or independent hospital'.

No. 21, in page 8, line 44, at end insert—

'( ) If subsection (1) comes into force before the commencement of section 11 of the Care Standards Act 2000—

(a) until that commencement, the references to a "private children's home" in sections 24(2)(c) and 24C(2)(a) of the 1989 Act as substituted by subsection (1) are to be read as references to a registered children's home; and

(b) until that commencement, the references to any "care home or independent hospital" in sections 24(2)(d)(ii) and 24C(2)(c), as so substituted, are to be read as references to any residential care home, nursing home or mental nursing home,

and paragraph 14(4) of Schedule 4 to the Care Standards Act 2000 (which amends section 24 of the 1989 Act) is repealed.'.—*[Mr. Hutton.]*

Clause 5

REPRESENTATIONS

Mrs. Spelman: I beg to move amendment No. 6, in page 9, line 9, at end insert—

'(1A) Every local authority shall make arrangements to ensure that any person qualified under subsection (1) to make representations has access to appropriate independent advice and support to assist him in making such representations.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 7, in page 9, line 10, after "subsection (1)", insert—

'and in making arrangements under subsection (1A)'.

Mrs. Spelman: Those who observe these debates will be pleased to hear that the consensual tone will return—certainly on the question of independent advice, which we debated in Committee.

Even in Committee, there was quite a lot of understanding of the importance of independence. We certainly believe that looked-after children should have access to independent advice and support if they feel that they must make a complaint about their personal adviser and the services that they are receiving. That was our purpose in tabling amendments Nos. 6 and 7.

I am sure that all hon. Members are all too aware of the poor experience of children in care in trying to obtain access to independent advice. Many children's charities and those who work with children are strong advocates of independent advice being made available to children. We maintain that view; it was our motivation behind tabling the amendments.

Save The Children Fund is even anxious about the over-dependency that might be created in the relationship between the care leaver and the personal adviser. It is concerned about whether the balance in that relationship is right without the existence of independent advisers to whom the care leaver may turn, should that relationship break down. Its uneasiness is easy for us to understand.

In Committee, there was quite a deal of debate about how the complaints procedure—should there be need to make one—would be developed. If, in the course of replying to my speech, the Minister explained a little more about the Government's thinking on that point, we would be greatly illuminated. It remains rather unclear in the Bill.

We have reached an important point in the outworking of a Bill designed to protect children and provide a satisfactory complaints procedure. There has been consultation about the form that the complaints procedure should take, but that has not left me reassured that the complaints procedure will be just and speedy enough to satisfy an unhappy care leaver that the complaint is being dealt with fairly and independently.

The personal adviser is the human face of the corporate parent, as I described it, and therefore represents the corporate parent—the state or the establishment—to the care leaver. It would not be unnatural for the care leaver to feel anxious and even to lodge a complaint about the adviser, who represents the corporate parent with whom the care leaver felt that he or she had fallen out.

Without an independent adviser to whom to turn in such a situation, and unable to see a fair and speedy way to have the complaint investigated, the care leaver might be tempted to swallow the complaint, go to ground, drop out of the agreed pathway plan or become estranged from the local authority, whose duty it would be to keep in touch. Whether or not the complaint was legitimate, the lack of an independent adviser would place the care leaver in a weaker position. For that reason, we have returned to the need for independent advisers.

The charity Action on Aftercare Consortium stresses the importance of developing a complaints procedure that is not unwieldy, bureaucratic or long. As I understand it from the consultation process, the dispute is not about whether independent advisers or advocates should be available to children who have complaints, but about the stage at which independent advisers would be made available. In the consultation document, there are choices to be made about whether that should take place at the first, second or third stage. We should put ourselves in the position of care leavers, for whom the process is likely to seem extremely intimidating; they may have to go through it on their own, possibly opposite a panel that will decide whether the complaint should be upheld. The process may reach the third stage before an independent adviser suddenly pops up out of the woodwork to provide help.

The term "independent adviser" is carefully chosen. The difference between advocacy and independent advice is that an advocate speaks for the complainant, but an independent adviser may be able to bring some objectivity to the process, and that would be extremely helpful.

I shall be interested to hear from the Minister how far the review of the complaints procedure has progressed and the role in that complaints procedure for independent advice, as envisaged in legislation to protect children. We consider it important to recognise in the Bill the need for independent advice, so that a just and speedy way can be found to address a complaint felt keenly by a care leaver, which otherwise may result in his or her being disillusioned with what is made available to help care leavers with their needs. Such disillusion would result in the failures of the system that have unfortunately all too often characterised the experience of care leavers.

Mr. Hutton: Once again, I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her amendment and the way in which she has presented her arguments. There is probably not a great deal of difference between us on the issue. The debate is about whether we want such a provision written into the Bill, or whether we should develop the arguments about advocacy through other means.

In the Standing Committee, I drew the hon. Lady's attention to the fact that we are consulting on the complaints procedure for the entire Children Act 1989. That consultation has included specific questions about the provision of advocacy services. I do not want to second guess the outcome of the consultation, as we want to give careful thought to the comments made about those services. However, I make it clear to the hon. Lady and her hon. Friends that there is no question of a lack of Government support for advocacy services in this area. She helpfully allowed the Standing Committee to have a full debate on the matter when we discussed the Bill in the summer.

We have taken significant steps to encourage and support the use of advocacy services. The hon. Lady knows, because she and I have debated the issue extensively, that we have given a firm commitment to making it clear in the statutory guidance that will be issued in support of the Bill that young people should be given access to the services of an advocate if they require it when making a complaint under the complaints procedure.

Once the consultation on the complaints and representation systems is complete, we shall be able to use the powers built into the Bill to describe its complaints procedures, so we can take forward the argument about advocacy at that stage. We do not need new powers in the Bill to do that, as the amendment suggests.

I accept many of the arguments that the hon. Lady put to the House this afternoon about the importance of advocacy services in the arrangements. I do not want her or her hon. Friends to think that we are lukewarm about the importance of advocacy services; we are not. We want to make sure that the revised complaints procedure is capable of addressing as promptly and expeditiously as possible some of the urgent complaints and problems that may arise in future around the operation of the legislation.

There is no point in introducing a complaints procedure that cannot address properly, fairly and squarely the concerns of young people leaving care. We want to make sure that the complaints procedure does that much more effectively in future than it has been able to do in the past. Advocacy services will clearly have an important role to play in that. We have made that position clear and, in the light of the reassurances that I have tried to extend to her, I hope that the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) will not consider it necessary to press the amendment to a Division.

Mrs. Spelman: I am sure that those listening will be encouraged to hear the return to a consensual tone. I am encouraged to hear that the Government are not lukewarm, as the Minister said, about advocacy.

I want to impress on the Minister a practical point that arises from what he said. Perhaps he will take this as an informal contribution to the consultation, although the official Opposition do not usually participate in Government consultation processes. The phraseology that he used suggests that when the relationship breaks down between the personal adviser and the care leaver, and the care leaver wants to make a complaint, he or she will not have adequate protection, unless the complaints procedure under review is altered or the guidance is changed.

The Minister said that care leavers will have access to advocacy services if they require it, but who decides whether they require it? If it is the personal adviser who decides whether the care leaver requires independent advocacy services, there will be insufficient arm's length

[Mrs. Spelman]

or independence for the care leaver to have confidence in the system. All the charities that are concerned about independent advocacy may be disquieted by that as well.

Mr. Hutton: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way and allowing me to correct a misapprehension. I am trying to preserve our position as we have not yet made a decision on the new arrangements, but whatever they are, we want them to command the confidence of young people. We shall make sure that that is the case. The important principle is that the young person feels that the system serves his or her interests, and we shall ensure that it does.

7 pm

Mrs. Spelman: That is a bit better, and I am encouraged. I am glad that I gave way, as the Minister has shown clearly that he has understood that it is extremely important that the care leaver feels that he or she has unfettered access to independent advice when the chips are down and a complaint is made. That would not be the case if the person against whom the complaint was lodged were in a position to make a decision about whether independent advocacy services should be rolled in. It is certainly satisfying to hear the Minister's clarification of that point. I accept that he wants care leavers and all those involved in this process to have confidence in the system. His reply makes it a lot easier for me to beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 6

EXCLUSION FROM BENEFITS

Mr. Hammond: I beg to move amendment No. 24, in page 9, line 24, leave out subsection (3).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 9, in page 9, leave out lines 26 and 27 and insert—

'is

(a) disabled within the meaning of section 120(2) of the Care Standards Act 2000, or

(b) a mother of a child under four years of age.

(3A) Where the Secretary of State provides by regulations that this section does not apply to a person by virtue of subsection (3)(b) he may provide by regulations such conditions as he shall determine to be in the best interest of that person and her child and if that person fails to comply with those conditions she shall cease to be a person to whom this section does not apply.'.

Mr. Hammond: May I start by drawing the House's attention to a typographical error in amendment No. 9, which refers to section 120(2) of the Care Standards Act? In fact, that reference should be to section 121(2) of the Care Standards Act. I am advised by the appropriate authorities that in a case where a typographical error is made but the meaning is clear, there is no reason why we should not debate the substance of the issue. If necessary, there will be opportunities later to correct what is written in the amendment. Responsibility for the error is entirely mine, so I apologise, I apologise, I apologise.

Mr. Hutton: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In the light of what the hon. Gentleman said about his amendment, will you confirm that although he acknowledged that there is a typographical error on the Order Paper, we shall be debating the wording that the hon. Gentleman proposed, not that which he originally intended?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The House will have heard what the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said about his amendment. Technically, however, we must debate what is on the Order Paper.

Mr. Hammond: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Clearly, the Bill will have to go back to the other place as Government amendments have already been accepted, so there will be an opportunity to correct the technical error in the Order Paper later. I hope that the Government will not seek to shelter behind a technicality in a debate about an important issue of principle. The House should discuss the important issues in the amendment, not the technicality of what is obviously a typographical error.

Clause 6 removes the right to means-tested benefits, consisting of income support, housing benefit and jobseeker's allowance, for 16 and 17-year-old care leavers, bringing their position broadly into line with that of other 16 and 17-year-olds. That is entirely consistent with the Bill's objective of providing a concept of support that is broader than entitlement to cash benefits. Of course, we accept that that support may, and almost invariably will, include a cash element. However, that should not be an entitlement, as it should be negotiated between the young person and the young person's adviser, who will seek to put together a package of measures that provide proper support, in the broadest sense, for that young person.

We accept a point that the Minister made many times in presenting arguments for the Bill, and agree that the rigidities of the social security system and the sheer difficulty of navigating a way through it mean that it is often not the ideal way of dealing with the needs of particularly vulnerable young people. Care leavers clearly fall into that category. Under the present system of support available to non-care leavers, there is an entitlement to benefits for disabled young people and young people who are lone parents when they live at home with their families, meaning their own parents.

In introducing clause 6, the Minister's intention is to give the Secretary of State powers to exempt groups from removal of eligibility for benefit so that they can be brought more into line with the treatment of other young people who are not care leavers. My amendment and our debate are triggered by a separate issue that the Minister raised in Committee, when he indicated that his intention was to go significantly further than matching the support that other young people receive. He said:

I have made it clear that we intend to exempt lone parents from the benefit entitlement provisions, as it is right and proper that they should continue to be entitled to benefits. If such a young person was living at home, he or she would continue to be entitled to benefits. That should apply also to young care leavers who are pregnant.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 13 July 2000; c. 137.]

The Minister therefore indicated that exemption from the provisions of clause 6, which removes the entitlement to means-tested social security benefits, should be extended to 15-year-old girls who are pregnant when they leave care. That does not bring the position of care leavers

into line with that of non-care leavers; it sends a confusing signal to some vulnerable 15-year-olds. The Minister's own consultation document, "Me, Survive, Out There?", reports that some studies show that between 25 and 30 per cent. of 16-year-old girls leaving care are already mothers. I have not been able to find a figure—it may not be available—that tells us how many of those girls are pregnant at the time of leaving care.

Whether we like it or not, some young people will see the loss of entitlement benefits as a negative thing. There is a consensus in the Chamber, as there certainly was in Committee, that the package of support, consisting of cash benefits and non-cash support, available under the Bill will, on an objective basis and from an adult perspective, be superior to that which might otherwise be available under the means-tested social security system. The Minister, myself and other hon. Members who have taken part in our debates all agree on that.

Although the Minister disagreed with me strongly in Committee, the removal of an entitlement to cash benefit, which will be replaced by a discretionary benefit payable by the local authority that will be negotiated with the young person, will not be seen by all young people as positive. Indeed, if the Minister considers which young people might feel that removal of entitlement benefits and replacement with discretionary support packages was not beneficial or did not suit their particular desires at that stage of their life, he will find that the most vulnerable young people are the most likely to see merit in trying to hang on to cash benefits.

We accept that care leavers who are disabled or lone parents who live at home with their own families constitute a special case. Before the summer recess, I tabled amendment No. 9, which seeks to limit the Secretary of State's powers to those groups and exclude the group which, as the Minister revealed in Committee, the Government intend to include. I spent some time in the summer consulting various outside bodies about the issue. The need to discuss a wider issue became clear to me and I therefore tabled amendment No. 24.

If the system of support for which the Bill provides is so superior to the means-tested, social security support, which it will withdraw, why would we want to give the Secretary of State the power to exempt from that arrangement those who are perhaps most vulnerable—those who are disabled or lone parents? Many organisations that deal with disadvantaged young people have made the point that the benefits system does not tackle the complex needs of vulnerable young people well, even if they can find their way through it.

It may be better to provide, if appropriate, a cash-based support system, but within the structure that the Bill establishes. That would obviate the need to create exemptions from clause 6. The underlying ethos of the Bill is that those for whom it provides should be better off than they would be outside the system for which it provides, despite the change in the level of entitlement to cash benefits.

Amendment No. 24 would achieve the objective of dealing with the cash needs of vulnerable groups of care leavers within the architecture of the Bill. It recognises the need for special support for those groups, and that a system that is more cash based may be appropriate for some. However, that system can be provided within the scope of the Bill. I hope that the Government can accept the logic of that argument and support the amendment.

We would find it unacceptable for the Secretary of State to have discretionary powers to exempt groups from clause 6 without specifying them in the Bill. The Minister, who is in charge of the measure, told us clearly in Committee that he believes that those powers could apply to young care leavers who are pregnant. We would resist that. It would have a more pernicious effect than exempting care leavers who are disabled or lone parents. It would send a negative and undesirable signal to vulnerable 15-year-old girls and would contrast starkly with the Department's campaign to discourage sexual activity among the under-16s.

Positive, continuing contact between the care leaver and the young person's adviser would be less likely if young people did not perceive that they received their stream of benefit payments—in kind or in cash—through that medium, but were able to gain access to them through the entitlement systems of the social security structure. The Government's consultation document, "Me, Survive, Out There?", made no reference to including pregnant care leavers in the category that should be exempted from the withdrawal of cash benefits. I hope that the Minister will be able to agree this evening that there is no need for powers to exempt categories from clause 6. If he is unable to go that far, I hope that he will agree that the Secretary of State should not have the power to exempt pregnant 15-year-old girls simply because they get pregnant while in care.

From every discussion that I have held with the Minister, I believe that he must agree that that would send the wrong signal to a vulnerable and exposed group of young people. I am sure that he would join us in wanting to do everything possible to discourage inappropriate behaviour among 15-year-olds, whether in care or not. I hope that the Minister will acknowledge that the Bill, when read in conjunction with his comments in Committee, clearly gives a negative signal to 15-year-olds. We must tackle that tonight, notwithstanding the typographical error in drafting amendment No. 9.

I hope that the Minister will deal with the substantive points and acknowledge that there is a simple and adequate opportunity to make the typographical correction when the Bill goes to another place. I am confident that, if amendment No. 9 is accepted, my noble Friends will co-operate in ensuring that the typographical error is corrected.

7.15 pm

Mr. Hutton: It appears that the origins of the amendment are some comments that I made in Committee about pregnant girls leaving care. I shall deal with that point later, and I hope that I can give the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) the assurance that he seeks. If he spent the entire summer expressing anxieties about my words in Committee, I am surprised that he did not raise them with me then. I could have given him the assurance, and we might have spared ourselves some time and effort today.

I shall not deal with the amendments on the basis of their technical drafting. We know what life can sometimes be like in opposition. We all make mistakes with amendments; I have certainly made such mistakes. I want to do the hon. Gentleman the courtesy of giving him a full and proper response to his arguments.

Notwithstanding the comments I have just made, the amendment is horribly defective. We must be clear about that. The attempt to align the definition of disability in the

[Mr. Hutton]

Care Standards Act 2000 with clause 6 of the Bill is a complete failure, because the section that the hon. Gentleman identifies as defining disability does not do that. As defects go, that is rather substantial. However, let us draw a line under that and try to deal with the arguments that he raised.

Amendment No. 9 would replace the general power to make regulations about the groups to be excepted from the new benefits regime with a far more restrictive power, which would identify only two categories of care leavers in the Bill. That approach runs counter to the way in which legislation on social security entitlements has often been drafted in the past. Primary legislation sets out the framework and establishes the principles, and secondary legislation tends to fill in the details. That is important if the law is not to become a blunt instrument. I am not in favour of that, and I am sure that hon. Gentleman is not.

We anticipate that the principles that the measure establishes will stand the test of time. However, matters of detail may change over time. We may find that we need to make minor adjustments in the light of experience. We therefore want to allow for some flexibility in the Bill so that implementation of the new provisions can take advantage of growing experience. That means putting the detail into secondary legislation so that, if necessary, it can be changed in future.

We have been clear throughout that we plan to make exceptions for disabled young people and for lone parents who will continue to be eligible for benefits. The benefit system recognises that they have special needs and permits them to claim benefit when they are living at home with their families. We are trying to treat these young people consistently. The new arrangements will continue to recognise these special needs. I think that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said that he recognised these special needs and that the young people concerned should continue to be eligible for these benefits.

I want to correct what the hon. Gentleman may have understood from my remarks in Committee. He was anxious about the matter. It seems that he gained the impression that we intend to exempt pregnant care leavers from the new funding arrangements in the Bill. We do not. I apologise to him and to others if that was their impression. It is technically possible for a pregnant care leaver to be eligible for income support and other benefits on the ground of a disabling condition to which, perhaps, the pregnancy itself might give rise. However, we have made it clear that disability and the fact that a young care leaver is a single parent—a lone parent—will be the conditions that we intend to exercise in terms of coming to a view about who should continue to be eligible for benefit entitlement. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is clear now about our intentions.

For disability, we plan to use the existing Department of Social Security eligibility criteria for claiming income support for the sick and disabled. As we are thinking about who is not to be excluded from benefit, it would be sensible to be consistent with the rules that say who can claim benefit. The amendment, which attempts to provide a new definition of disability, could be confusing. That would not be a helpful way in which to proceed. Definitions should be consistent. The hon. Member for North–East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), who was a DSS Minister in the previous Administration, might be advancing a similar argument if he were standing in my shoes.

On lone parents, given that we are talking in this context about young people aged 16 and 17, it seems completely otiose to prescribe the age of a child in order for the parent to be able to claim benefits. That is what the amendment would do. Having decided that lone parents are a special group who should have access to benefits, it does not seem right to impose any additional conditions. If they claim income support or jobseeker's allowance, they will be expected to meet the normal conditions of entitlement for the benefit concerned. We see no need, therefore, for extra conditions for this particular group of lone parents.

Interestingly, amendment No. 9 talks in terms of mothers; the Government talk about lone parents. The point of principle on which we consulted in "Me, Survive, Out There?" was that we are setting up new arrangements that mirror as closely as possible the sort of support which young people would normally be able to expect from their parents. In the case of lone parents, their special needs are recognised in that they are able to claim benefit even if they are living at home, and that right is what we are reproducing for lone parents who have been looked after.

It would be a retrograde step to limit the provision to mothers. In reality, it is mothers who will be the ones looking after children—I accept that overwhelmingly that will be the case—however, it is possible that a lone father might be bringing up a child alone.

Mr. Hammond: In care.

Mr. Hutton: Yes, possibly in care. We do not want this legislation to discriminate against any such person. The amendment would allow a mother to continue to claim benefit if she had a child under four years of age, but not a father bringing up a child on his own. I accept that those cases might be exceptionally few and far between, but in fairness to those people we could not accept the amendment. There is no logic or fairness to it.

Under the terms of the Bill, these lone parents will have a young person's adviser, a pathway plan and all the support that will go with that. They will have a needs assessment like any other eligible or relevant child, and their responsible authority will agree with them a package of support, just as it does for anyone else. That package will be devised to meet the young person's individual needs and it will take account of the benefits to which he or she is entitled, just as someone else's pathway plan would take account of any income or resource that was available to them. It would not be helpful to single out this group to impose special conditions on them.

I hope that, at least in one respect, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge might be reassured by my response. It is clear that we have a different view. He prefers a particular way of dealing with the matter in the Bill, and we have tried to provide an alternative approach, which would preserve the issues of principle that he and I share and have in common. I suspect that I might be wrong, but I hope that he will not feel it necessary to push the amendment to a vote. If he insists on voting, I shall strongly advise my right hon. and hon. Friends to oppose the amendment.

Mr. Hammond: I am grateful to the Minister for dealing with the substance of the amendment and not

seeking to shelter behind a technicality. He has always shown great courage in taking that line in Committee and in the House in dealing with the issues that need to be discussed. However, I am disappointed with his condemnation of our use of the definition of disability that is contained within the Care Standards Act 2000. It seems to be an eminently appropriate definition. It reads that

> For the purposes of this Act . . . a person is disabled if . . . his sight, hearing or speech is substantially impaired; . . . he has a mental disorder; or . . . he is physically substantially disabled by any illness, any impairment present since birth or otherwise.

That seems to be quite a good definition of disability.

Mr. Hutton: It is a very good definition because I tabled the relevant amendment. However, it is not the definition that the DSS uses in determining eligibility for benefits on the basis of disability. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman accepts the need for some consistency in those cases.

Mr. Hammond: Perhaps that is an argument for joined-up government from the Minister.

The Minister wondered aloud why I had not contacted him during the summer to discuss the confusion that may have arisen in my mind about what he said in Committee. There was no confusion. I do not believe that there was any confusion in the minds of hon. Members on either side of the Committee. The position seems pretty clear. The Minister said:

> I have made it clear that we intend to exempt lone parents from the benefit entitlement provisions.

He added:

> If such a young person was living at home, he or she would continue to be entitled to benefits. That should apply also to young care leavers who are pregnant.

There is not much scope for misinterpretation there.

In response to an intervention from me, he said:

> Many young girls leaving care are pregnant . . . I am told that as many as one in four girls who leave care are pregnant.

A column later, I said to the Minister:

> Has he given any thought to what message is sent to young girls aged 15 in local authority care, their co-residents in the children's home and others who are pregnant will anticipate receiving benefit because of the exemption, but those who are not pregnant will not expect benefits?

The Minister said:

> I am not convinced that young women will get pregnant because they might then be entitled to income support.

A column later, I said:

> That sends some strange messages. I do not suggest that 15-year-old girls in care will automatically think that they have one year left in which to become pregnant, but there will be serious consequences to anything that seems to people's peers, however misguidedly, to reward them for a type of behaviour that we would not seek to encourage.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 13 July 2000; c. 137-39.]

Nowhere in those exchanges over three columns of *Hansard* did the Minister seek to retract the statement that he made in column 137 that the exemption should apply also to young care leavers who are pregnant.

The Minister has said that he wants to allow in the Bill for some flexibility in how the Secretary of State seeks to use his power to make exemptions. Having heard what the Minister said in Committee—that he would intend to apply the exemption also to all young care leavers who are pregnant—we specifically do not want to leave the Secretary of State any flexibility in interpreting how he uses the exemption.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment No. 24.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am satisfied that the debate has covered both amendments in the group.

Amendment proposed: No. 9, in page 9, leave out lines 26 and 27 and insert—

'is

(a) disabled within the meaning of section 120(2) of the Care Standards Act 2000, or

(b) a mother of a child under four years of age.

(3A) Where the Secretary of State provides by regulations that this section does not apply to a person by virtue of subsection (3)(b) he may provide by regulations such conditions as he shall determine to be in the best interest of that person and her child and if that person fails to comply with those conditions she shall cease to be a person to whom this section does not apply.'.—*[Mr. Hammond.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 135, Noes 312.

Division No. 316] **[7.29 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Garnier, Edward
Amess, David	Gibb, Nick
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Gill, Christopher
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*	Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Baldry, Tony	Green, Damian
Bercow, John	Greenway, John
Beresford, Sir Paul	Grieve, Dominic
Blunt, Crispin	Gummer, Rt Hon John
Body, Sir Richard	Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Boswell, Tim	Hammond, Philip
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*	Hawkins, Nick
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia	Hayes, John
Brady, Graham	Heald, Oliver
Brazier, Julian	Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter	Horam, John
Browning, Mrs Angela	Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*	Hunter, Andrew
Burns, Simon	Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Butterfill, John	Jenkin, Bernard
Cash, William	Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Chope, Christopher	Key, Robert
Clappison, James	Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*	Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Lansley, Andrew
Collins, Tim	Leigh, Edward
Cormack, Sir Patrick	Letwin, Oliver
Cran, James	Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*	Lidington, David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*	Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Day, Stephen	Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen	Loughton, Tim
Duncan, Alan	Luff, Peter
Duncan Smith, Iain	McIntosh, Miss Anne
Evans, Nigel	MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Faber, David	Maclean, Rt Hon David
Fabricant, Michael	McLoughlin, Patrick
Fallon, Michael	Madel, Sir David
Flight, Howard	Malins, Humfrey
Forth, Rt Hon Eric	Maples, John
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman	Mates, Michael
Fox, Dr Liam	Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Fraser, Christopher	May, Mrs Theresa
Gale, Roger	

Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Simpson and
Mr. James Gray.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry

Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Hammond: I beg to move amendment No. 25, in page 9, line 41, leave out subsection (7).

At present, the Bill applies only to England and Wales—with the exception of clause 6, which, because social security is a reserved matter, applies to the United Kingdom as a whole.

The Government clearly expect the Scottish Parliament to produce legislation similar to that in the Bill. That is an arrogance in itself. In Committee, when we discussed issues relating to this matter, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) accused me of displaying—in an amendment that I had tabled—a lack of faith in the devolution settlement. He confidently assured me that the Scottish Parliament would ensure that legislation mirroring the Bill was introduced. I understand from my colleagues in Scotland, however, that no progress has been made, and that consultation is still going on.

As the Minister acknowledged in Committee, it is clear that in the Scottish Parliament there is nothing like the consensus in favour of the legislation that exists across the parties in England. Perhaps in a moment the Minister will be able to give us his latest anticipated timetable for getting similar legislation through the Scottish Parliament.

As drafted, clause 6 would be applied in Scotland before legislation equivalent to the rest of the Bill had been passed by the Scottish Parliament. That would mean children leaving care in Scotland being left with no means of support, because clause 6 would withdraw their entitlement to means-tested social security benefits before legislation had entitled them to benefits from local authorities on a model parallel to that established in England and Wales. We all agree that that would be unacceptable.

The Government's solution is not to wait until they can get their act together and ensure that appropriate legislation exists throughout the United Kingdom, but to give themselves a power to prescribe, by order, certain groups that are to be exempt. In our last debate we discussed the exemption of certain groups, such as lone parents and people who are disabled. Clause 6(7), however, specifically enables the Government to exempt groups by providing powers to make different regulations in different areas of the United Kingdom. In other words, it enables the Government to exclude people living in Scotland from the provisions of the clause.

Although social security is a reserved matter—in the devolution settlement, it was considered appropriate that social security matters throughout the United Kingdom should be dealt with by this Parliament—the Government's proposal is to block exempt Scotland from the effect of clause 6. Social security was kept as a reserved matter because it was obvious to those drafting the Scotland Bill that, if social security regimes differed in different parts of the country, it could lead to unfortunate examples of people migrating to find the benefits that were most advantageous to them. It was felt that the appropriate solution was to have a uniform system of benefits throughout the UK.

The fact that the Government have had to seek a regulation-making power to allow them to impose Scotland's exemption from clause 6 highlights a problem in the devolution settlement. The problem arises when legislation comes forward where delegated and reserved areas of policy making interact in a way that will leave one area stranded high and dry if the devolved Parliament does not co-operate with the Government in Westminster to ensure that appropriate legislation is in place in time.

The Government's proposal is to give themselves, through subsection (7), powers to make regulations that make different provisions for different areas and to use the subsection—they have freely admitted that it is their intention—to exclude Scotland. Means-tested cash benefits as an entitlement would continue to be payable in Scotland, although they would not be payable in England.

We have a clear and perhaps genuine disagreement across the House on the likely effects of that. There are those—they spoke both on Second Reading and in Committee—who believe that the entitlement to means-tested cash benefits is not likely to be important to people leaving care, and that they will see the common sense that we all agree on: the package of support on offer from local authorities is likely to be, taken in the round, superior to the value of the cash benefits that are on offer under the social security system. However, common sense tells me that some people at least who are faced with the prospect of leaving care at 16 and who have been expecting to be entitled to receive means-tested cash benefits will not see that arrangement—which requires them to keep in contact with their local authority, to negotiate with it about what they need for their support, how they are going to use and to spend it, what part of it will be cash and what part will be in kind—as a benefit to them.

As I said in the previous debate, common sense tells me that it will be the most vulnerable, the most at risk, who are likely to resist most the move from a cash

[Mr. Hammond]

entitlement benefit to a package of support provided by the local authority. The cash entitlement system gives no-questions-asked cash, albeit perhaps not particularly generous sums, rather than the alternative of accessing support on an agreed basis with an agreed package through the young person's adviser.

I predict that there will be a steady trickle, if not a flood, of young people from England seeking to claim cash benefits in Scotland—perhaps, for example, when there has been some conflict or disagreement between the young person in question and the young person's adviser or the local authority. The Bill's intention is clear—that no cash alternative will be available to care leavers in England and Wales—but the practical effect of creating an exemption for Scotland will be that there is an alternative, always tantalisingly available, to the care leaver in England. That is to go north, to obtain an address in Scotland and then seek access to means-tested social security benefits in Scotland. That seems to be undesirable.

One of the Bill's main purposes has been, rightly, to arrest the drift of children leaving care from areas where they have been brought up and cared for, to London and other big cities—where they are much more vulnerable to people and things that prey on them—and to keep them in contact with their local authorities. We support that objective. It seems to be madness to put in place a mechanism that will offer them an opportunity to access means-tested benefits precisely by moving away from the area where they have been brought up and away from the influence of their local authorities. It seems that that has been done simply to try to paper over the cracks in the devolution settlement, which the Bill has exposed by combining areas that are delegated and areas that are reserved.

The Government cannot have it both ways.

Mr. Shaw: Earlier, the hon. Gentleman referred to agencies that had various concerns about aspects of the Bill. That was one of the reasons why he was tabling amendments. I wonder, in relation to amendment No. 25, whether he has been in contact with any child care agency that feels that there will be a flood from Runnymede to Roxburgh to find those benefits. That is for the birds, as I said in Committee.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman's views on the matter are well known to me. I would be more interested in him seeking to deal with the point of principle. It may be a trickle, not a flood. I said that it may be a trickle rather than a flood, but I wonder if it sends the right message to young people leaving care that the Government think that it is right that they should not have access to means-tested cash benefits.

The Government have put in place a system of probably more generous support—we do not know the details yet—but that means that young people leaving care have to keep in contact with their young persons adviser; essentially, they have to negotiate that package with the adviser. The Government argue—I tend to support them in the argument—that that is a positive thing. That will ensure that the young person is better supported and better able to make the transition from being a young person in care to being an adult finding his own way in society, but it is perverse then to create that one loophole.

In Committee, the Minister said that he anticipated a short transition; in other words, he anticipated the period between the introduction of the legislation in England and the passing of similar legislation in Scotland to be short, but, at the same time, he rejected an Opposition amendment that would have required the Secretary of State to give a certificate whereby legislation having substantially the same effect was in place in Scotland before legislation was brought into effect in England, so requiring the Secretary of State to wait until the uniform regime could be applied throughout the UK. It was clearly the intention of the drafters of the Scotland Bill, in reserving social security to this Parliament, to avoid a situation—precisely the one that the Minister proposes to create—where the social security regimes on offer were different in different parts of the UK, creating unnecessary tensions.

The Minister told us that it would be only a short transition period. Perhaps, then, he can tell us precisely when he expects the legislation in Scotland to be passed, how he expects that legislation to be passed, given the different views that prevail in the Scottish Parliament, and why he did not accept a proposal that required legislation to be in place in both countries before the Bill came into effect.

8 pm

The Government should wait until they can treat all the people of the United Kingdom similarly on a reserved matter such as social security. Anything less undermines one of the important principles that was established when certain types of legislation were reserved for this Parliament.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) started his remarks by expressing concerns about clause 6(7). I assure him that subsection (7) uses a standard form of words for social security legislation, and that its inclusion in the Bill is to allow the Secretary of State the flexibility to react flexibly to future developments. It also allows, for example, the Department of Social Security to pilot new benefit schemes. Therefore, there is nothing alien or fundamentally unsatisfactory about the clause. It is also certainly not in the Bill to exclude Scotland en bloc, as the hon. Gentleman said.

As the hon. Gentleman appreciates, the provisions of clause 6 will commence in England and Wales, but not in Scotland until Scottish legislation is in place. As I said, subsection (7) is simply a standard power in social security legislation to allow that type of flexibility.

The hon. Gentleman's remarks seemed to indicate a concern that the Government envisage that different groups of young people will be exempted from the Bill's benefits provisions in the different countries of Great Britain. I assure him that that is not the case. We intend to re-harmonise benefit provision across Great Britain as soon as it is feasible to do so. I also assure him, in answer to his question, that, on 5 July, Scottish Ministers gave a very firm commitment to introducing legislation providing for support for care leavers as soon as possible—in the next Session of the Scottish Parliament,

I believe. Once that has been done, we shall be able to commence the use of the terms of clause 6 of the Bill in Scotland, as it will be commenced in England and Wales.

Mr. Hammond: Surely the Minister does not purport to be able to assure the House that the Scottish Parliament will pass such legislation.

Mr. Hutton: Of course not; that is a matter for the Scottish Parliament. However, the hon. Gentleman asked me when I thought that legislation would be presented to the Scottish Parliament. My information is that it will be introduced in the next Session of the Scottish Parliament.

In Committee, the hon. Gentleman made very clear his feelings about devolution. I think that Labour Members and some Opposition Members have detected where he and other Conservative Members stand on devolution. Although that is not a matter for this debate, I suspect that we shall return to it in the next few months.

The hon. Gentleman believes that some matters were reserved to Westminster to ensure that there could be no possibility of any variation in them across Great Britain. The Bill deals not only with devolved matters—support for children who are being looked after—but with reserved matters—welfare benefits. We have been very careful to keep in close touch with the Scottish and the Welsh devolved Administrations to be quite certain that they are content with the way in which to handle that new complexity. They are so content. We have also been at pains to ensure that no child is accidentally disadvantaged because of the Bill. We are confident that the Bill will achieve that aim.

The Government have made it clear that it is right in principle that social security benefits should be available on a common basis across the country. However, we recognise that there may be occasions when Edinburgh cannot legislate for the same provisions to our own timetable. We need, therefore, to consider the circumstances on a case-by-case basis to decide whether it is essential that the provisions are implemented countrywide. In this case, it is not essential. Rather, we prefer to proceed with implementation of legislation in England and Wales that will benefit very many children for whom the state is responsible and who have to date not always received the best care and support.

Consequently, as is obvious to everyone, there will be a transitional period in which benefit entitlement for 16 and 17-year-olds who have been looked after will be different on either side of the Scottish border. The Government agree that the sooner entitlement can be harmonised, the better. However, we do not believe that it would be right to deprive English and Welsh looked-after children of all the benefits of the Bill's provisions, which have received widespread support in both Houses of Parliament and more widely during the Bill's passage. The Government have also been at pains to ensure that, during the transitional period, no child will find himself disqualified for support when he moves across the Scottish border in either direction.

The principle is clear: we do not propose to hold up implementation in England and Wales. The practicality will be that the traditional period will be short. As I said, we have assurances from Scottish Ministers that they will legislate for Scotland at the earliest possible opportunity.

We had a long and extensive debate on this issue in Committee. I hope that I have been able to reassure the hon. Gentleman that we intend to proceed with implementation in England as soon as we can, from next April, because the benefits for English and Welsh children are very substantial. We hope to re-harmonise the situation in Scotland at the earliest possible opportunity. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will feel able to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister talked about needing flexibility in the Bill to deal with future developments. However, it has been made very clear—I do not think that the Minister would deny it—that subsection (7) will be used to deal with the transitional phase.

It is simply not good enough for Ministers to wheel out the devolution slur every time we raise issues that are bound to arise as we all get used to dealing with the situation that has been created by the Scotland Act 1998. We are exploring what happens when the House is asked to consider legislation in which—this Bill may be the first such example—most of the provisions deal with devolved matters, for which the Scottish Parliament has full authority and jurisdiction, but one provision deals with a reserved matter.

We have to address the issues of timing and of United Kingdom Ministers' inability to give assurances on the passage of appropriate legislation in the other Parliament. I think that it was right to raise the issue. I also do not think that the Minister's comments on devolution and on my comments in Committee will bear scrutiny. By highlighting the issue, we are pointing up—and will continue to point up, whenever the need arises—the inherent instability of the devolution settlement and the need continuously to address such issues.

I entirely agree with the Minister when he says that he does not want to deprive Welsh and English children of the legislation's benefits simply because of any tardiness in the Scottish Parliament. I entirely understand his motivation in saying that.

In requesting to withdraw my amendment—although I am far from satisfied—I simply say that the Minister has today demonstrated the confusion in the Government's legislative programme. He told us that, when this Bill was being drafted, it was intended that it should receive Royal Assent and be implemented before the Care Standards Act 2000. Events, however, have been the other way around. One might think that the Government should be in sufficient control of their legislative programme to be able at least to determine which of their measures is implemented first. The Minister is now asking us to believe that he can give effective assurances—a nod and a wink—on what will happen in the Scottish Parliament.

The Minister may have different information from mine, but my understanding is that—although Scottish Ministers have been given orders by No. 10 Downing street that they have to have legislation mirroring this Bill as soon as possible—the arithmetic in Scotland and the views held there on the withdrawal of cash entitlement benefits from 16 and 17-year-olds are such that the Minister cannot predict with confidence that that legislation will be passed.

Dr. Brand: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there might be a Machiavellian plot to phase the transfer? If it

[Dr. Brand]

results in a flood of care leavers moving to Scotland to go onto benefits, would that not be a powerful incentive for the Scottish Parliament to pass the same legislation?

Mr. Hammond: No, I think not. Having made the point—it has been made before, as the Minister rightly said—I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 7

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendment made: No. 22, in page 10, line 27, at end insert—

'(5) In the Care Standards Act 2000, in Schedule 4 (minor and consequential amendments)—

(a) in paragraph 14(4), the words ", as it has effect before the commencement of section 4 of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000"; and

(b) paragraph 14(5) and (6),

are repealed.'.—*[Mr. Hutton.]*

Clause 8

INTERPRETATION, COMMENCEMENT, EXTENT, WALES AND SHORT TITLE

Amendment made: No. 23, in page 10, line 29, after "from" insert "section 7(5) and".—*[Mr. Hutton.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

8.10 pm

Mr. Hutton: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

At the heart of the Bill lies one simple but powerful idea—that children in care deserve the same chance to get on in life as any other child; but that has never been the reality. Very few young people in care have ever enjoyed the opportunity to thrive and develop. The facts speak for themselves.

Children in care make up 25 per cent. of those sleeping rough on the streets of London. Young men previously in care make up 22 per cent. of the prison population and that figure rises to 39 per cent. of those under 21. Fewer than one in three leaves care with a single GCSE pass, compared with 95 per cent. of children overall. That is not the failure of the child in care; it is a failure of the system of care. At long last, we are now beginning to address that.

The Bill, together with the other measures we have taken to strengthen and improve children's social services, will lay the foundations for new opportunities for young people in care to get a good education and a good job, to have a stake in and some hope for the future, and to enjoy the same on-going support and help that other children receive as they become adults and move towards independence. It has been in those areas that the care system has let down children in care, often with terrible consequences.

By passing the Bill tonight, we have the opportunity to say that we will no longer tolerate those failures in the care system, that we have acknowledged our responsibility to see to it that young people in care get a decent chance in life, and that what is good enough for our own children must, in future, become good enough for every child in care.

Children get only one chance in life to grow up—and for them to grow up safely and realise their full potential, they need the active care, help and support of their parents. The new duties and responsibilities placed on local authorities under the Bill will, I believe, help to ensure that looked-after children receive this from their corporate parents.

We all recognise that achieving those objectives will take more than a change in the law. Neither can we afford to be complacent about the scale of the challenge, which is real and significant, but the changes made by the Bill will provide a strong impetus to the new approach and culture that we want to see spread across children's social services, where we have higher ambitions for looked-after children so that social services provide young people not just with care, but with a real chance and opportunity in life, equipping them with the skills and knowledge that they need for their future success.

The Bill will allow local authorities to do all that for the children in their care and, backed by the new resources for children's social services in the spending review, we are now taking the necessary and essential steps towards meeting the collective responsibility that we owe as a society to looked-after children.

Many people have helped ensure that we have taken those steps forward—not only with the Bill tonight, but with the Government's other measures in this area. I should like to thank in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), for both his leadership and his commitment to children in care throughout his time as Secretary of State for Health. He, more than any other person tonight, is entitled to take credit for the Bill.

I should also like to thank young care leavers such as Marie Piper and Tommy Turner, who helped us to prepare the Bill and make sure that it addresses the concerns of children in care. Finally, I should like to thank members of the Standing Committee for their positive and helpful scrutiny of the Bill.

The Bill marks the beginning of a new deal for young people in care. It signals our determination not only to end the all-too-obvious failures of the past, but to build a new and brighter future for some of the most vulnerable and socially disadvantaged people in our country. It is a good and decent Bill and I ask the House to support it tonight.

8.14 pm

Mr. Hammond: I welcome the Minister's remarks. All Opposition Members support the idea of a level playing field and seek to redress some of the disadvantages that children leaving care clearly face compared with those who have been more fortunate and perhaps have had more opportunity to enjoy their childhood and prepare for adult life.

We welcomed the Bill when it was introduced. We have consistently welcomed measures that improve the protection of vulnerable children in our society, but that does not mean that we have no significant issues to raise. Some of those issues involve important points of principle, but there has never been any doubt that we support the underlying purpose of the Bill. The Minister has acknowledged that on many occasions.

My noble Friends in another place played an important part in mapping out the final shape of the Bill. It builds on the Children Act 1989, which remains the basis of our system of child protection and child support. I am glad to say that there has been a large degree of consensus even when we have needed to debate the details. We have identified weaknesses and failures in a system that is supposed to protect vulnerable children, and hon. Members on both sides of the House have acknowledged that it is time to correct those weaknesses and failures or collectively share the responsibility for allowing them to continue.

I am grateful to the Minister for his offer to consult Opposition parties on the regulations. As so often happens, an unnecessary level of tension is created during the passage of the primary legislation because we do not have sight of the regulatory structure that will inform its operation. We have to assume the worst, but I hope that we will be satisfied and reassured by the regulations in respect of many issues on which we have expressed grave concern. In general, if it were possible for Departments to produce draft regulations for hon. Members to consider alongside the primary legislation, we might find that we needed to spend rather fewer hours arguing about things that might never happen, but which we cannot be sure will never happen until we see the precise form of the regulations.

I am grateful to the Minister for emphasising his desire for consensus throughout the proceedings on the Bill. As I have said before, I believe that on a matter such as child protection we can only proceed by consensus. The Opposition certainly hope that we will proceed in that way in future, to continue to strengthen and reinforce the body of child support and child protection legislation.

8.18 pm

Mr. Dawson: It is useful to spend a little time reflecting on the importance and qualities of what everyone should regard as a fine piece of legislation. It is a particularly fine measure not only because the Government have drafted it well, prepared it well and consulted on it well in the first place, but because they have altered it and improved it in response to well-informed opinion. Frankly, the best-informed opinion and the highest quality of advice that the Government have received have come from young people with experience of the care system.

I dismiss entirely the view that the Government are arrogant or do not listen, and I can cite examples of some of the most vulnerable young people in our society who have been welcomed by Ministers and civil servants and have been fully involved in the crucial work of the Department of Health on areas of concern about which they know so much. That is tremendously to the credit of the Government and those officials.

This is very fine and much-needed legislation. I first had formal responsibility for young people in care in 1987. We had in-care meetings and conferences, and young people's concerns about leaving care were always the same. They were left bereft and felt that they were pushed out into the world without support, training or induction or any on-going involvement from local authorities. They were expected to cope independently at an age at which none of us in the Chamber would have been able to cope.

It is a testimony to their bravery and resilience that a proportion of those young people came through that experience successfully. Some of the finest people I know have been through the care system and coped with experiences that would daunt anyone, in care and after leaving.

There are some individuals who make great efforts. A woman in my constituency runs a children's home, and every Sunday young people and adults as old as their late 30s go back to the home to visit. That is a matter of working way beyond the call of career and duty, through professional and caring values. Of course, we also try to find solutions and put measures in place with housing authorities.

I started working with young people in care before the Children Act 1989. There have been many references to that Act tonight. It is a great piece of legislation, embodying the finest principles and making children the focus of concern, with their needs made paramount, but it was left full of holes. Section 24, in particular, which gave powers to local authorities, did not change the situation for children leaving care.

There are good and decent people of all parties in the House, but the care system in which I worked up to 4 April 1997 was a disgrace. It was completely inadequate. There may be consensus now on the broad basis of the way forward, but the Labour Government inherited a care system that had palpably failed. When I was working in the system, it did not seem that the Government were listening to our concerns. They seemed not to care about the vulnerable people in the system. They had other values, expressed in statements about there being no such thing as community or society. Their priorities did not include young people in care.

When I came to the House, I saw it as a fantastic opportunity to try to change the care system. At a conference three years ago, I outlined what changes I wanted in the care system. I wanted investment, and we are getting an extra £290 million in a five-year programme through quality protects. I wanted attention to standards, and we are getting that through the Care Standards Act 2000. I wanted more money for training, and we are getting that. I wanted attention to be paid to children's rights, and the Government, to their enormous credit, are funding a children's rights director and a new national organisation for children and young people in care. I wanted attention to be focused on the issue of leaving care. If there is one outstandingly excellent thing about the Bill, it is the extension of statutory duties to local authorities for young people up to the age of 21. That is profoundly important and good, and the Government should receive the great credit that they deserve for this excellent measure.

8.27 pm

Dr. Brand: I join the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) in rejoicing in the Bill. We have gone a long way since the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) gave evidence to the Health Committee and made a commitment to extend local authorities' duties of care to people up to the age of 21. We have had a hiccup or two, but I am glad that we have arrived where we have.

There are one or two disappointments. It is sad that the collective brilliance of parliamentary draftsmen could not come up with some way of describing this group of people as young people, rather than children. Nowadays, when people reach 16 they no longer see themselves as children,

[Dr. Brand]

although technically they might still be so. It is a pity that we have to stick to old-fashioned definitions even when we are discussing what is undoubtedly progressive legislation.

Our debates here and in Committee have been very interesting. The concept of a local authority as a corporate parent interests me greatly. One could interpret that in more than one way. One could be corporate in the sense of being a corporation. Sometimes, one got the impression that we were discussing not care plans but business plans, that something had to be delivered against a target, and that there would be no reward unless the target was met.

I hope that the framework is firm enough where it has to be, but flexible enough in other areas, so that the corporate parent can act as a tolerant parent. My experience of young people in care is that they are there because their parents were either totally intolerant of them or ignored them, neither of which is very acceptable. The worst situation would be to have a rigid framework in the care planning that disaffected the young people even further.

That raises my main concern about the implementation of this excellent Bill. How will it cope with the care leaver who is not motivated to be the good son or daughter of an excellent corporate parent? Most of us have the privilege of 16 years' experience before we start looking after a 16-year-old. It will be a very hard learning curve for local authorities to be able to meet this very important responsibility, which goes far beyond handing out resources and telling people what they can or cannot do. Careers advisers or representatives of the Benefits Agency can do that, but more is involved in the task facing local authorities.

Resources are important, and there will never be enough cash resources, but I am more worried about having enough human resources. The Minister has been most helpful in that he has not been too specific about what type of human resources are required. However, the human resources involved should be of high quality, and they should be supported. Our deliberations have not touched on the need to support the advisers and social workers who will have to implement the Bill and work with the children involved.

The House has done its best with the Bill, which will pose major headaches and responsibilities for local authorities. We must be tolerant of those authorities and support them as their new role evolves. It is easy to pass legislation that tells people what to do—but much good legislation has failed because the difficulties of implementation have not been resolved. Many hon. Members have experience of the real world. However, I hope that Ministers, who have been so flexible in the guidance that they have created, also understand the need to support the people charged with the vital task of helping children leaving care.

Finally, I congratulate the Minister on steering the Bill through the House, and all the members of the Standing Committee. The Minister will not wind up the debate. I am used to ending my contributions by saying that I look forward to what he has to say, but I have heard it all now—often more than once, but then the question has often been asked more than once too.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Yours have.

Dr. Brand: I am usually pretty selective in my questions. However, I and my party support the Bill entirely. I hope that its implementation will be a great success.

8.33 pm

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I shall be brief. I welcome the Bill very much. Like other hon. Members, I was a social worker for many years, in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. In that work, I saw how much we failed the young people in our care. I can think of young people who were cast adrift on society and who ended up in prison or on the street. The Bill is a tremendous tribute to the Government, and I rejoice in its passage through the House today.

I am especially keen to pay tribute to the young people who came up from Wales to the House. They put their views forcibly to hon. Members, from Wales and elsewhere, and were instrumental in some of the amendments that have been made to the Bill in its passage through the two Houses of Parliament.

The consultation on the proposals for regulations is taking place in Wales, and issues remain to be worked out. For example, three local authorities have suggested that professional advisers should be volunteers, while others have suggested that they should be paid. Such matters need to be sorted out, in consultation with the young people.

I hope that children will never again be cast out into society in the way common when I was a social worker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister and everyone involved in the Bill—and especially the young people whom I mentioned earlier.

8.35 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas: I, too, welcome this Bill. I am pleased that it has gained so much consensus in the House, and I look forward to its early implementation.

Some of the worst care scandals happened in Wales, but it has since been revealed that similar problems have happened in England as well. One of the Government's primary tasks was to restore the confidence and trust of the public—especially of young people—in the care system. That had been lost over the years, for reasons that hon. Members set out in the debate tonight.

This Bill and the Care Standards Act 2000 mean that that trust is being restored. The Government are paying attention to what young people and hon. Members have said, and the Bill is part of a package of measures that will improve the lot of young people in care, and of those leaving care.

The Bill is slightly better now than when we first considered it three months ago. I welcome the amendments that the Government have made, especially the one that takes account of the need for further education to be considered alongside higher education. That was an important issue, especially for young people leaving care in rural areas.

As the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) said, much of the Bill's implementation depends on the guidelines that the Government will set out. The situation

in Wales is slightly different from that in the rest of the country, as devolution means that the National Assembly for Wales will decide what those guidelines should be. The hon. Lady mentioned advisers, but the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) also made an important point about advocacy. I hope that the guidelines in Wales, at least, will seek that independent voice in the advocacy services. The right organisations exist in Wales to provide that service, if they are given the right responsibility under the Bill.

I am pleased that the Government have resisted the more sanctions-based approach advocated by some hon. Members, and that they have rejected an approach that is based more on the stick than the carrot. Although some young people may not be able to cope with the pathway plan and will not therefore emerge from the system with the proper support, the Bill means that every effort will be made to encourage those young people to work in co-operation with the people charged with looking after them.

That is a much better approach. We have to accept that there will be some failures in the care system, but we must ensure that the legislation that we pass is as permissive, enabling and empowering as it can possibly be. The Bill goes a long way towards achieving that.

My one concern is that the Bill misses an opportunity to assist former relevant children—young people leaving care—by helping them with training and education up to the age of 24. The Bill is permissive on that account, but I should have liked it to place a duty on local authorities to offer that support.

We have some experience of the permissive and discretionary role that local authorities have, and the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) mentioned the opportunities in the Children Act 1989 that have been missed. That small chink in the Bill was explored in Committee. I know that the Government are keen to ensure that it does not become a gaping hole, but the Bill could have placed a duty on local authorities to support former relevant children up to the age of 24. We know that 75 per cent. of care leavers have no qualifications, and one of the Bill's primary tasks is to provide a framework to improve their lot.

However, that is the only weakness that I can detect in the Bill. That is a wonderful thing to be able to say. The Standing Committee discussing the Bill was my first experience of such work, and I was very pleased to serve on a Committee considering such a progressive and empowering piece of legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

West Coast Main Line

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

8.39 pm

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): I was beginning to think that the uncertainty about what time this debate would start was part of a conspiracy to ensure that I was away from my other constituents this evening, who are following the fortunes of Watford football team, which is playing Manchester United at home. However, I shall not detain the House for long, certainly not until 10 o'clock, as I am sure that other hon. Members are keen to know the results.

Many of those who have seen the title of the Adjournment debate will believe that it refers to the chaos and disruption seen on the west coast over the past few days. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe will be pleased and relieved to know that it does not. This debate is about the chaos and disruption that will be caused to the people in my community by the works required to achieve the upgrading of the west coast main line.

First, may I say that I fully support the project to upgrade the west coast main line? The opportunity to improve services along the line must be welcomed, and in Watford we expect to see a substantial extension to services as a result of the upgrade. Although I have some concerns about the capacity available to local services, that is not an issue for tonight. I recognise, too, that sometimes there must be disruption in order to gain those benefits. However, we expect our public utilities, notably Railtrack and the National Grid Company, to do all within their power to minimise disruption and seek the most suitable means of carrying out works so that, wherever possible, communities are protected from the upheaval of the track improvements. However, there are two areas along the line in my constituency where proposals from Railtrack are causing great upset and concern to residents.

The first is an issue on which I have already made representations to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. As part of improving the power source for the railway, a series of electrical transformers is being sited along the line. Railtrack has applied to the Secretary of State for an order under the Transport and Works Act 1992 to authorise a package of projects for improving the power supply to the line. One such project includes the siting of an electrical transformer in Gypsy lane in the north of my constituency. Gypsy lane, for those who do not have the advantage of knowing Watford, is a beautiful country cul-de-sac that leads out to greenbelt land, and people regularly walk and cycle there. It is a single-lane road, with no footpaths and no turning spaces, other than those of the residents' own driveways.

Railtrack originally planned to site the transformer on the east side of the track and took some soundings from a few residents. They expressed concern, not so much about the position of the transformer as the access to it. Residents have never opposed the fact that a transformer needs to be sited in the area, but have always opposed the plan that access to it should be via Gypsy lane, which is inappropriate for use by huge vehicles. Railtrack considered that and moved it to the west side. Residents have never supported that site and access to it would still be required via Gypsy lane.

[Ms Claire Ward]

Railtrack has estimated that the work will take about six months. Once built, the transformer will require regular maintenance. That would all need access along this narrow lane. It is no wonder that the residents have opposed Railtrack's proposals.

The site favoured by residents—the original site identified by Railtrack—could be accessed from private land and would be more suitable for construction and maintenance vehicles to use. The land is part of Leavesden aerodrome, now used by Leavesden film studios, and using it would cause less disruption. Equally, using that site would minimise the visual obstruction in this attractive area.

I have supported residents in their discussions with Railtrack. The Transport and Works Act 1992 will now be considered by a public inquiry. However, we continue to urge Railtrack to reconsider the alternative position now, rather than wait until the inquiry, which will not be considering the issue until August next year.

The second issue relates to the south of my constituency, in Oxhey village—another quaint and attractive part of the constituency which is being threatened by Railtrack's proposals. There are two areas of concern. First, a further transformer is required near Bushey station. Although residents had been led to believe that it would be sited near the end of the platform, more recent proposals—without consultation—indicate that it is due to be built further away from the station but nearer to homes. Residents are understandably concerned about the loss of their visual outlook by the erection of such a large building. Some have also expressed concern about the health implications of being so close to a fairly high electromagnetic field.

Secondly, Railtrack has asked the National Grid Company to provide a high-voltage electricity supply to the line. The cables will be run from Elstree sub-station to Bushey railway station. Unfortunately for my constituents, it is proposed that trenches be dug to put the cables along the middle of those narrow Victorian streets. Not only will that cause disruption, increased noise and dirt to residents, but the parking problems in the area will be magnified by the displacement of cars due to the works. Although the majority of the area is residential, a number of businesses such as newsagents, specialist shops and takeaways rely on passing trade and the ability of customers to stop close by. The cabling works would not only make the road almost unusable but would prevent cars from parking in any relatively close proximity. Those businesses will be severely affected and, as yet, they have not been advised of what assistance, if any, Railtrack or the National Grid Company will provide.

Watford borough council has also expressed its opposition to the proposals, and is considering whether to grant the necessary planning permission for the National Grid Company to cross the recreational ground, owned by the council.

Although the National Grid Company claims to have sought to keep the community fully informed of the proposals, it has not been much of a consultation. Residents have stressed the disruption and chaos that will result from the works and have suggested alternatives that have been refused by the National Grid Company and Railtrack.

The first option that we asked them to consider was the use of tunnelling equipment. We are aware that, on other stretches of roads in St. John's wood, the National Grid Company is using the technology available to it by rotary drilling and steel casing a borehole through which the cables are threaded. Equally, when the cables cross the major A41 road under the proposed route, the National Grid Company will tunnel underneath. Residents rightly want the National Grid Company to minimise disruption by using the best technology available to it in undertaking this work. Yet the National Grid Company and its customers, Railtrack, refuse to do so.

Residents and the council have also requested consideration of alternative routes where fewer residential areas would be affected by the cabling. To date, there appears to have been some reluctance to provide exact costings and details of the alternatives and the technical reasons why they are not practical. Neither Railtrack nor the National Grid Company appears interested in those alternatives.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Does my hon. Friend agree that similar problems are occurring in many communities up and down the west coast main line upgrade route? Does she agree that, if Railtrack were to treat those alternative suggestions seriously, it would have far better support in those communities? Instead, people suspect that Railtrack is not up to the west coast main line upgrade.

Ms Ward: I agree with my hon. Friend. Although there are not as many Members in the Chamber as one would wish to be present for an Adjournment debate, I am confident that there are many other constituencies, up and down the west coast main line and elsewhere, where Railtrack and the National Grid Company have not taken due consideration of the concerns raised by residents about the disruption in their area. Indeed, people would be more willing to engage in discussions with Railtrack if they felt that they would be listened to. Negotiations will continue over several months, and I hope that Railtrack and National Grid will be interested in talking to residents and the council.

People in Watford have been told that the proposals are the most cost effective. It seems that Railtrack is not prepared to spend extra money to reduce disruption and protect the environment. The companies are making millions of pounds in profits for shareholders each year, and they have statutory powers allowing them to gain access to private land and highways to carry out their work. On refusal, they can apply to the Secretary of State. That gives the companies immense power over communities that are expected simply to accept proposals and be grateful that they have been informed of the plans.

As a result of my securing the debate tonight and delays by the council in deciding its course of action, Railtrack has written to me to advise that, if we do not accept its plans, it will seek permission to use an alternative and even more disruptive route. Bullying by such companies is quite appalling, and is not conducive to achieving a solution. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe will recognise that when she replies to the debate. It is the unfortunate result of their serving the interests of their shareholders rather than those of the communities in which they work. It does not seem appropriate that companies in private hands,

acting in the interests of their shareholders, should have statutory powers far in excess of any held by other companies or industries.

In preparing for this debate, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions were unsure about which of them could most appropriately respond to the issues that I intended to raise. I understand the confusion, and it seems that my right hon. Friend has drawn the short straw. I realise that she cannot easily answer some of the points that I have made, particularly on planning, and I should appreciate it if she would pass on those concerns to the DETR.

The local community, councillors and I oppose the proposals. Yet the power of the council to refuse planning permission to National Grid, should it decide to do so, can be easily thwarted by the company's ability to turn to the Secretary of State, who would be placed in a difficult position. It cannot be right that a private company, supposedly acting in the public interest, can use the Secretary of State to justify its desire to keep costs low and profits high while being unable to explain to the local community why alternative proposals are not suitable. I hope that my right hon. Friend will stress that point to her colleagues in other Departments.

I should be interested to hear what standards of consultation and action my right hon. Friend expects from public utilities that are now in the private sector. Does she agree that such companies, with the benefits of wealth, power and lack of competition, have a duty to consider the effects of their actions on the environment and local communities? Does she agree that, when companies make large profits, it is not unreasonable of my constituents to expect the best service rather than simply the cheapest?

In the words of National Grid, the present route was chosen because most of it—approximately 90 per cent.—fell within sparsely populated roads or rural land, with the aim of minimising disruption to the community as a whole. The remaining 10 per cent. of the route passes along residential streets in the immediate vicinity of Bushey station. I believe that it is possible for National Grid to make the extra effort to reroute the cables away from residential areas, so that the route from Elstree sub-station to Bushey railway station causes minimum disruption. That is the view of my constituents, and we hope that my right hon. Friend will encourage National Grid and Railtrack to reconsider the proposals with local residents, me and Watford borough council.

8.53 pm

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Ms Ward) on obtaining the debate. She is known across Government for the vigour with which she has pursued these matters, which may be why a Minister from the Department of Trade and Industry rather than the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is answering the debate. I well understand the strength of her feeling about how her constituents have been dealt a hand that they regard as unfortunate.

As my hon. Friend generously pointed out, her concerns cover two distinct but interrelated issues. She is concerned about the Railtrack plans for modernisation of the west coast main line—in particular, how they will affect her constituents. As she rightly points out, that is a matter for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

I undertake to my hon. Friend and to her colleagues who are supporting her in this debate to ensure that my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport is made well aware of the matters that she raised. They are important and, were I in a similar situation, as a constituency Member I would pursue a similar course of action to that of my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend is also concerned about the disruption that would be caused by the National Grid Company's proposals for the laying of underground power cables in Oxhey as part of a power upgrade for the west coast main line. That is a matter that falls directly to me as the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe. I am replying for the Government, but, by my so doing and by my concentrating on the Department of Trade and Industry aspects, she must be assured that, across Government, we share many of her anxieties and we will try to consider her arguments as fully as possible, especially the points of substantive policy for the future.

As my hon. Friend knows, Railtrack has applied to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for an order under the Transport and Works Act 1992 to authorise that range of works to upgrade and modernise the west coast main line. Indeed, although Railtrack is a private company, it is regulated by the rail regulator under the Railways Act 1993. Although the Government recognise that the promotion of schemes such as the west coast main line upgrade are matters for the company, where they affect third parties Parliament has provided a procedure under the Transport and Works Act to permit individuals affected by the planned works to make representations.

A public inquiry into the application is to be held next year, starting in January. I understand that the inquiry is scheduled to take place at 10 different venues along the route, to ensure that the proceedings are accessible to all those who wish to take part. Once the different venues and dates have been settled, my colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will write to all the interested parties to inform them of the arrangements.

I understand that, arising from that application, a number of my hon. Friends's constituents have registered objections to the proposed siting of an electrical transformer at Hunton Bridge, Kings Langley. That is one of the works included in the application for a Transport and Works Act order. All interested persons will have an opportunity to make their views known on that and any other proposals in the application at the public inquiry. My hon. Friend will be pursuing that matter with her characteristic vigour.

I am sure that my hon. Friend recognises that it would not be right for me to comment in advance of the inquiry on any proposals included in the Transport and Works Act application. To do so could prejudice the proper consideration of the application in light of all the evidence that has to be presented to the inquiry or made in writing. In the usual way, the inspector who is making the inquiry will provide a full report on the proceedings.

I am sympathetic to the concerns of my hon. Friend and her constituents about the disruption that is likely to be caused by the works. We all know the great upheaval

[Mrs. Helen Liddell]

that can be caused to local communities because of such works. However, checks and balances exist in legislation to ensure that the rights of landowners and occupiers are not ignored.

Under existing legislation, electricity companies must first seek to make contractual arrangements with landowners or occupiers for rights to install electric lines. Such arrangements are called wayleaves, which also confer access rights for the purpose of inspection, maintenance, repairs and anything else that may be required.

I understand that the National Grid Company has obtained all the wayleaves that it requires voluntarily, except for one, covering the section of the route from Attenborough fields to Oxhey. That land is owned by Watford borough council, and its policy and procedures committee met yesterday to decide whether to agree to grant the wayleave on a voluntary basis. I understand that the committee referred the matter back to the full council, which will meet on 13 December.

Should Watford borough council decide not to grant the NGC a wayleave, the company can then apply to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for the grant of a compulsory wayleave. I cannot discuss the merits of that case, as, if an application for a compulsory wayleave is made in due course, it may come before the Secretary of State for decision.

It might, however, be helpful to my hon. Friend and her constituents if I outline generally the procedures followed if an application for a compulsory wayleave is made, to illustrate that the current provisions encourage negotiation—as my hon. Friend wants—rather than compulsion and to ensure that such procedures are conducted fairly and independently.

Applicants for compulsory wayleaves for new lines must first give a period of notice to landowners of at least 21 days. If voluntary wayleaves have not been agreed at the end of the notice period, application can then be made to the Secretary of State. Should the—usually—on-going negotiations between the parties be unsuccessful, my Department will, if requested, arrange a hearing at which the parties can make their cases. That hearing would normally be conducted by an inspector from the DTI's engineering inspectorate, who acts independently in such matters, and who, after hearing the evidence, submits a written report to the Secretary of State with his or her recommendations. The Secretary of State's decision is then conveyed to the parties. We do not yet know whether that procedure is likely to be required.

In summary, I cannot comment on the merits of the decisions that have to be made, because of the Government's quasi-judicial position in the matter. I have listened carefully to the debate and will ensure that my colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are informed as to the strength of feeling of my hon. Friend and of her constituents—especially in relation to the rather cavalier way in which my hon. Friend believes that her constituents have been treated by Railtrack.

If a wayleave is received by my hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the normal procedures will be followed. I understand that the NGC has already discussed the route options publicly and has consulted organisations such as the traffic police.

The substantive point of my hon. Friend's criticisms relates to the performance of companies such as Railtrack and the NGC. Regardless of whether utilities are in the public or the private sector, companies have certain responsibilities that flow from the performance of their public service obligations. We expect them to supply on demand; to provide a high level of service and, in doing so, to take the needs of individuals into account.

We are all grown-up people who realise that, in the real world, there will be a need for development work, and that such work causes disruption. Such matters can be dealt with under various statutes, such as the Electricity Act 1989, the Transport and Works Act 1992 and the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991. Those measures can all be used, but they do not diminish the criticism correctly made by my hon. Friend: when any company undertakes works that will cause not only economic but social disruption, it has an obligation to take that disruption into account. Companies must behave considerately and sensibly towards people such as my hon. Friend's constituents.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend on achieving the debate. I have listened to it carefully. The *Official Report* will be made available to my colleagues in other Departments.

In conclusion, as Airdrieonians football club is not playing tonight, I can, without hesitation, wish my hon. Friend's team every success.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes past Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 1 November 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*
Order for consideration, as amended, read.
To be further considered on Wednesday 8 November.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister was asked—

Drugs (Young People)

1. **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): If he will make a statement on action being taken to reduce drug taking among young people. [133637]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): A key objective of the Government's anti-drugs strategy is to reduce the incidence of drug misuse among the under-25s in order that they can achieve their full potential. Our target is to reduce the proportion of young people using the drugs that cause the greatest harm—heroin and cocaine—by 50 per cent. by 2008, and by 25 per cent. by 2005.

The outcome of the recent spending review provides expenditure of up to £1 billion to underpin delivery of the strategy, and this includes taking forward prevention and education work. For example, Blackpool will have its own drug action team from next April; and in 2000–2001, nearly £20,000 has been made available to the local education authority there to make sure that young people receive the help and advice that they need.

Mr. Marsden: I thank my right hon. Friend for those comments, which underline the seriousness, commitment and—if I may say so—the thoughtfulness with which the Government have taken the programme forward. Many of the programmes being proposed are pilot programmes of reintegration that emphasise a holistic treatment of drugs. Will my right hon. Friend consider giving clearer and sharper guidelines to health authorities and social services to make sure that those holistic elements are high on the agenda when the pilot programmes move on to other areas?

Mr. McCartney: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is critically important that pilot projects are not the end of the matter but that they are the beginning of a holistic, across-the-board range of services. That is what we are attempting to do in Blackpool, where there has been a pilot project. The announcements that I have made today flow from that project. The health authority has the responsibility to provide continuity of care for those clients identified during the pilot project. However, I should be happy to meet my hon. Friend and discuss any problems that he may want to raise, or any further improvements that may help in his area.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): We all know how seriously the Minister takes this matter. This morning's newspapers carried reports about his announcement of a new approach to minimise the risk to youngsters taking drugs. However, is there not a risk that changing a policy of "Just Say No" to one of "Just Take Care" will lead to more youngsters thinking that it is okay to take drugs?

Mr. McCartney: The right hon. Gentleman and I have known each other since 1987, so I take his question at face value. It was not a quip, or an attempt to be flippant. However, there has been no change in policy. The matter is far more complex than "Just Say No". We want to target and work with four groups of young people, and the first and overwhelmingly important aim is to prevent them from taking drugs.

For people who are already taking drugs or who are at risk of doing so, we want to implement a strategy of getting them off drugs. We also need a strategy to ensure that people who are on drugs do not lose their lives. When a child loses its life, there is no strategy left.

The issue is therefore complex. Most hon. Members are parents or grandparents. Some have children who take drugs, and not all will know about it. Every right-minded parent would agree that the Government have a responsibility to prevent drug taking, but additionally that the Government must try to ensure that young people who are taking drugs do not lose their lives.

What I announced yesterday was not a new policy. However, for the first time in 15 years club owners who have a turned a blind eye to drug taking in their establishments will be required to take their responsibilities seriously and join the Government in promoting a new culture in clubs. Owners will work to prevent drug taking in their clubs. They will also ensure that their staff are trained to make sure that safety measures are in place to deal with any drug taking that might go on, and to work with young people in the youth culture. In that way, young people will be told, in their own language, about facilities to help them come off drugs.

The Government want to help young people who are still not prepared to come off drugs to do so safely, so that the police do not have to knock on their parents' door one morning to tell them that their child is dead. That is the Government's strategy, and I do not think that anyone in Britain would say that it is wrong-headed. It is the only strategy worth pursuing. That is why the message that I delivered in Liverpool yesterday was so strong. I hope that all hon. Members will support what I said.

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the campaign in the Brighton and Hove area initiated by the local newspaper, the *Evening Argus*, and supported by local agencies? Its aim is to

encourage people to give money to agencies working with the street homeless and those with drug problems, rather than to beggars on the streets. What evidence is there for a link between street begging and drug addiction?

Mr. McCartney: I know of the projects in Brighton. Indeed, a fortnight ago I did an interview with a young person from *The Big Issue*, who is on the programme and looking to change his life style and take up journalism. I have also given a commitment to go to Brighton with the young people to look at the project from the point of view of the partnership approach and that of the young people themselves.

It is true to say that people have the absolute right to donate to someone on the street. People will continue to do so, but not everyone can do that and they cannot do it to everyone who approaches them. So the Government's advice and that of the agencies is clear and simple and it is the right advice. If people want to make a contribution to solving the problem of homelessness, to getting young people off the streets and into a safer environment, or to helping young people who have mental illnesses and are on the streets, they should make it through an organisation that works not only with one young person but with every young person who is in a vulnerable position 365 days a year. If they get that balance right, people can make personal donations, but also make donations that help not just one person but a range of people in vulnerable situations.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the highest priority is to act against those who push drugs to the young? Will he adopt the Opposition's proposals to introduce a seven-year minimum sentence for any adult convicted for the third time of supplying drugs to children?

Mr. McCartney: The Government are deeply committed to getting drug dealers off the backs of our young people and out of our communities. We are also deeply committed on a national and international basis to dealing with drug barons who operate in the international marketplace and continually try to breach this country's defences and promote drugs to our young children. The Government have taken a range of measures, and we are prepared to do more.

Some months ago a new process was introduced to deal with the seizure of the assets of criminals and to make certain when drug dealers are prosecuted that further action is taken against them. I have a simple view. In some instances of people who are found guilty of drug dealing, I would lock them up and throw the key away.

Interdepartmental Co-ordination

2. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What recent assessment she has made of the Government's progress on interdepartmental co-ordination. [133638]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): The Government have taken a wide range of steps to improve the way in which Departments work together, including the creation of cross-cutting teams working on issues such as social exclusion. They have also set out a blueprint for co-operation in the performance and innovation unit's report "Wiring it up", and I will be reporting to the Prime Minister on progress against this early next year.

Mr. George: Does the Minister accept that local communities that need help now face a growing snow storm of disconnected initiatives and schemes? Although places such as Cornwall are grateful for all the action zones, sure starts and new deals, and the many other silos of funding through many Government Departments, the average local person needs a PhD to comprehend interdepartmental complexities before they can even get to first base. Does the Minister share the growing fear that local authorities are becoming weighed down with bureaucratic overload as they get stuck on the treadmill of perpetual bidding?

Marjorie Mowlam: We are working with local authorities to deal with any potential difficulties in this area. The national neighbourhood renewal strategy will help to build communities and work with services such as the voluntary, police, health and probation services to deliver services on the ground. To make sure that the situation that the hon. Gentleman describes does not come about, we have recently ensured, for example, that the drug action teams have borders that coincide with those of the local authority and youth teams. We have a good example of best practice, where the strategy is working, and we will certainly share it with the hon. Gentleman's authority if it is facing difficulties.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): Given the damning findings of the Phillips report, will my right hon. Friend look at how we can make our civil service more accountable?

Marjorie Mowlam: When we consider the Phillips report and the difficulties that BSE created, our first thought is with the victims and their families. We are looking hard to see what we can do in terms of compensation. In terms of the civil service, some changes will be made under the 167 recommendations in the Phillips report, which we are now considering. We will certainly tie any recommendations into the modernising government strategy, which aims to update, reform and innovate within the civil service.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Will the right hon. Lady be sending her cost-cutting teams into the national health service, which is wasting millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on a changeover plan to adopt the euro? Is it not the case that the programme is not compatible with the line taken by her right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who said, during his trip to Tokyo, that if there were a referendum tomorrow, he would not sign up for the euro?

Marjorie Mowlam: It is in line with the Prime Minister's position, which is that we will go into Europe and accept the euro when it is in our own economic interest in terms of the five criteria.

As for the NHS—that it is changing for the future can be only positive. We must never forget that the NHS is being rebuilt after the privatisation package that the Conservative Government tried to introduce. We had to

pull back from the privatisation under the previous Government and start to ensure that the NHS was available for everybody in this country.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My right hon. Friend will be aware that if we are to exercise control over the arms trade, we need cross-departmental working. In 1996, some time ago, the Select Committee on Trade and Industry recommended cross-departmental working after the BMARC—British Manufacturing and Research Company—report. Are plans in progress for the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the security services to work together so as to get a grip on the arms trade?

Marjorie Mowlam: I do not know the agenda items for the meetings of those groups, but I know that they meet to look at a host of issues. I will report to my hon. Friend by letter as to whether the topic in which he is interested has been covered recently.

Special Advisers

3. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If she will make a statement on the co-ordination of the role of special advisers in Government Departments. [133639]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): The duties and responsibilities of special advisers are set out in the model contract for special advisers, a copy of which is in the Library.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The number of special advisers has risen from 38 four years ago to 79 at present. If those advisers are so special, will the Minister tell us of one positive, original contribution made by them during the past year to the delivery of services to the British public who are paying their high salaries?

Marjorie Mowlam: We have never hidden the fact that we would use more special advisers than the previous Conservative Government. We have always been open and transparent. We publish a code of conduct for special advisers so that there can be no question as to what they do. We publish details of how much they are paid; the process is completely open and transparent.

I can answer his question only by reference to my two special advisers. On drugs, they have carried out work on different programmes and options and have come up with some extremely creative ideas. On genetically modified foods, they have also worked hard and produced some interesting ideas. I am sure that that holds true for every other Department.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the number of special advisers to almost every party represented in the House has increased since 1997, and especially to the Tory Opposition, because the Short money was increased from £1 million to £3 million plus? If the Tories have not spent the money on special advisers, but have transferred it to their head office across the road, it is high time we knew where the money has gone, because there could be a fiddle.

Marjorie Mowlam: I listened carefully to my hon. Friend, as I am sure you did too, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Do special advisers have access to the knowledge network? If so, what safeguards are there to ensure that the knowledge network is not used for party political purposes?

Marjorie Mowlam: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that special advisers do have access to the knowledge network. The reports that they make to their Ministers will go on the knowledge network and will be shared across Departments, to increase efficiency and effectiveness and to ensure that Government Departments join up more—which is the nature of this question—than they do now. After that, information will be made available on a broader front where possible.

Information Technology

4. **Barbara Follett** (Stevenage): What steps her Department is taking to promote the use of information technology among the older members of the population. [133640]

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): Over 13,000 people have already started free training courses at 843 centres under the UK online computer training initiative. Around half of those who have joined are over 50 and around 18 per cent. are of retirement age. The older population is one of the key target groups for the first 600 UK online centres, which will be rolled out early next year, with approximately 6,000 by the year 2002.

Barbara Follett: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply and welcome the work that has already been done. Would he do all that he can to ensure that older people are aware of the existence of subsidised IT training schemes, such as the learning shop scheme that is being run by North Hertfordshire college in Stevenage?

Mr. McCartney: Like our grandparents, I am very keen to ensure that older people gain access to IT. Throughout the country, a range of initiatives are taking place at the moment, including the rolling out of a programme to the 2,000 most deprived communities in Britain; and one of the target groups in those communities is older people. Therefore, the Government are absolutely committed at every stage to invest in providing such access, not just for older people but across the board, so that our society is not divided into the information-rich and the information-poor. Everyone must have access to the net, including older people.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I doubt whether any members of the ministerial team qualify for that description, but I certainly do. May I ask the Minister to look again at the way in which his colleagues in other Departments communicate with Members of the House by way of information technology? I instance a case where I wrote to the Minister of Agriculture in April. He tells me that he sent a reply in July, but because the courier did not deliver, it did not arrive until last week. Given the co-ordinating role that the Cabinet Office and the Minister

have with other Departments, may we look again at the communication between Departments and Members of the House?

Mr. McCartney: I give this absolute commitment to the hon. Member—I nearly said "the older Member". The whole process of the modernising government strategy and of the co-ordinated IT strategy is to ensure that Members of the House are properly serviced by Departments. I give him this assurance. If Members do have a problem, they should come to Mr. Fixit and we shall see what we can do.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Wyatt.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Thank you for calling me, Mr. Fixit.

Every community in the world has its digital divide, and the Minister will have seen the G8 papers on that. I wonder whether, for the older people in our country, we might pilot an initiative to give them access on a bank holiday to the computers in schools and businesses, where we can give them teaching and training. That is what they need most of all because they fear new technology.

Mr. McCartney: That is a fair point. A key area that we are investing in is skills. As part of that process, I am monitoring regularly to ensure that older people are getting access to information technology, training, and sometimes upskilling and new training. If my hon. Friend has any ideas on that, I am prepared to meet him and see what we can do to help.

Legislation

5. **Mr. Tony Baldry** (Banbury): What role she plays in the mechanism of preparing Government legislation. [133641]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office takes responsibility for legislation emanating from the Cabinet Office, and as a member of the Cabinet takes collective responsibility for the whole of the legislative programme.

Mr. Baldry: The Minister will be aware that we have not had a state opening of Parliament in December since 1921. The fact that we are to have a state opening in December this year is a consequence of too much legislation, too hastily drafted and too hastily rushed through the House. Who in the Cabinet has the responsibility for ensuring that this situation does not happen again and that legislation is properly drafted and properly considered?

Mr. Stringer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the information about 1921. I was not aware of it. However, I was aware that in this Session the Government have introduced 41 Bills, in the 1981–82 Session the previous Conservative Government introduced 46 Bills and in the 1985–86 Session they introduced 49 Bills. *[Interruption.]* It is not the number of Bills that is significant; it is the fact that the Conservative—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister must have a hearing.

Mr. Stringer: It is the fact that, in the other place, twice as many amendments have been passed with Conservative support against the Government as were passed against the Government when the Conservatives were in power.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): The Minister said that the Minister for the Cabinet Office is responsible for Bills emanating from the Cabinet Office. However, he may recall that the Queen's Speech a year ago said that legislation would be introduced

to increase the effectiveness of the power to remove regulatory burdens.—[*Official Report*, 17 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 5.]

Will he therefore explain to the House why the only Cabinet Office Bill promised in the Queen's Speech has not materialised?

Mr. Stringer: As hon. Gentleman knows, in April this year the Regulatory Reform Bill was published. It has been the subject of intensive consultation, both with the Deregulation Committee in this House and the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee in the other place. The fact is that so many Bills have been stopped in the other place that, if we had introduced the Bill this Session, there would have been an even greater legislative logjam. The Government are committed to introducing the Bill at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr. Lansley: The fact is that deregulation is not a sufficient priority for the Government. One of the Minister's responsibilities is to examine the burdens imposed by legislation. Can he explain why the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales has reported that the costs to small businesses of implementing new legislation in the year to July 2000 was nearly double that of implementing new legislation in the preceding year? Not only are the Government increasing the burdens of regulation on business, but the rate at which those burdens are increasing has nearly doubled year on year. Can the Minister explain that?

Mr. Stringer: Improving the quality of regulation remains a Government priority. I have seen a number of statements emanating from the Federation of Small Businesses, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Conservative party and they have all massively confused the cost of administration with the actual cost of the policy. The Government make no apology for introducing the minimum wage; we make no apology for giving people—for the first time in many cases—the right to a holiday; and we make no apology for protecting people. We are committed to improving the quality of the regulatory framework.

Deregulation

6. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What action she has taken to improve the scope of deregulation since October 1999. [133642]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): The answer to my hon. Friend is very similar to the answer that I gave to the

hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley). We published the Regulatory Reform Bill in April and we shall introduce it at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr. Pike: Is it not a fact that the Government's consultation and pre-legislative scrutiny on this Bill have been exemplary and show a positive way forward for the Government's introduction of legislation? Given what the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said, is my hon. Friend the Minister surprised to learn that Conservative Members did not participate in the scrutiny of the Bill? They showed no interest whatsoever in deregulation.

Mr. Stringer: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. I also want to thank him and the Deregulation Committee for the valuable contribution that they made during the consultation exercise. I am not at all surprised that Conservative Members did not participate in the consultation process. If they had done, they might have learned something about improving the quality of regulation. The shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition would then have used the same figures instead of figures differing by £5 billion when they talked about the regulatory burden on this country.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Surely the Minister knows that his own Government introduced an Act to ensure that new regulations would cover the employment agencies industry. Does he accept that those regulations have appeared in several draft forms and that the industry is in turmoil wondering what the Government will do? That is not better regulation, but interference with an industry that did not need changing.

Mr. Stringer: Many Conservative Members want it both ways. They want full consultation on the process and they want decisions to be taken immediately. They cannot have it both ways. The Government are committed to improving both the quality of legislation and the quality of consultation.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Does my hon. Friend accept that there is such a thing as deregulation too far, and that the past few weeks have shown us that a bonfire of regulations may on occasion lead to a blazing furnace of diseased cattle?

Mr. Stringer: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. This Government are committed to protecting people as well as to improving the quality of regulation. That always depends on striking the right balance between protecting people and the benefits of any proposed legislation.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [133667] **Mr. Eric Illsley** (Barnsley, Central): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 1 November.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further such meetings later today.

I should like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the local authorities and the emergency services for their unstinting efforts and all their work in helping and supporting people affected by the recent storms. I am sure that the House will also join me in offering sympathy to all those people in the areas affected.

Mr. Illsley: Given the absolute shambles into which our national railways have descended as a consequence of the disastrous Tory privatisation and the subsequent failure of Railtrack and the train operating companies to invest in even the most basic safety measures, does my right hon. Friend think that it is now time to look again at the structure of our national railways, including the number of train operating companies—

The Prime Minister *rose—*

Mr. Illsley: I can understand my right hon. Friend's enthusiasm for me to sit down, but does he think that it is time to look again at our national railway industry, particularly at reducing the number of train operating companies and perhaps at returning Railtrack to public ownership?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps I got up at the right point; I do not know.

Of course there are structural questions about the railways. That is one reason why the creation of the Strategic Rail Authority gives us the opportunity to deal with the problems of fragmentation in respect of privatisation. The other thing that is absolutely vital is extra investment in the railways. Through the transport plan, we have the opportunity over the next 10 years for—literally—the largest ever infrastructure investment in our railways that the country has ever seen. It is vital— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I will not tolerate the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) interrupting all the time.

The Prime Minister: It is vital that we get this extra investment in the railways, and one reason why the Conservative plans to cut that investment and impose £16 billion worth of cuts on our public services would be so disastrous.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): On behalf of the Opposition, may I associate myself with the Prime Minister's opening remarks and the tribute that he has paid to local authorities and emergency services that have coped in extreme circumstances, and with the condolences that he has sent to the families of people who were tragically killed?

On another cross-party matter, as we approach Remembrance day and the thoughts of the nation turn once again to those men and women who gave their lives or suffered terrible injuries in defence of our freedom, would not it be an appropriate time to do the following two things? First, in the light of the Canadian judgment two years ago,

should not Members on both sides of the House agree to overturn the policies of successive Governments—Labour and Conservative—and compensate the remaining survivors of far east prisoner of war camps?

Secondly, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the Government will support our call today for a permanent memorial in London and in Northern Ireland as a fitting tribute to those members of the armed forces and the Royal Ulster Constabulary who have died defending the whole of the United Kingdom from terrorism over the past 30 years?

The Prime Minister: We are indeed sympathetic to the latter point, which is why it was announced earlier that we are looking at the prospect of putting up a memorial to the officers and soldiers who have died. Their bravery was absolutely outstanding throughout the entirety of the troubles.

As for far east prisoners of war, I cannot add anything to what I said last week, because they are one of the matters with which the pre-Budget report deals. However, it is the case that successive Governments have failed to make good our obligation to those people; the Conservative Government failed to do so during their 18 years in office. I hope that we shall be able to do something for them and that, when we do so, it will be taken as a recognition of the enormous debt of gratitude owed by the whole country.

Mr. Hague: I thank the Prime Minister for his reply about the memorial and we look forward to next week's announcement in the hope that it will be treated in that spirit and not in a party political spirit.

Turning to more controversial matters, since the Government's pre-Budget statement is always characterised by endless spin, cynical distortion and gross omissions, will the right hon. Gentleman admit today what the total tax burden on the country was when he took office and what it is today?

The Prime Minister: As I have said many times before, the tax burden this year is falling. It is correct to say that we tightened fiscal policy in our first two years in government, but I am pleased to be able to say that that policy was relaxed and the tax burden increased by more when the right hon. Gentleman was a member of the Cabinet, during the last two years of Conservative Government.

Mr. Hague: Why can the Prime Minister not give a straight answer to a straight question? Why can he not give the figures? There must be something in the folder through which he is leafing, and we are happy to wait for him to find the answer. In fact, the total tax burden was 35 per cent. when he took office and it is 37 per cent. today. The typical hard-working family in Britain faces £670 a year in extra tax. Is he aware that figures from the House of Commons Library, which are to be published this afternoon, show that the tax burden on businesses and families is now higher, under his Government, than at any time in the history of Britain?

The Prime Minister: That is nonsense, and I can deal with both the right hon. Gentleman's points. In fact, the figure was 35.3 per cent. when we entered office. It is correct to say that the tax burden went up in our first two years in government; it is coming down this year. However, the increase is less than occurred in the last two years of Conservative Government, when the figures, from memory, were 33.3 per cent. and 35.3 per cent. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will explain how he came to be a member of a Cabinet that raised the tax burden in that way.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's £670—the figure Conservatives keep mentioning—we have done a little research into it. Of that sum, £400 is assumed to be the result of the changes in advance corporation tax that were made a few years ago, whereas, in fact, as a result of pension funds rising 70 per cent. because of rises in the stock market since the election, those sums are entirely illusory. The next £200 is based on the assumption that every family in the country smokes at least 20 to 30 cigarettes a day. That is why the House of Commons research on which the Conservatives base their claim stated, in terms, that the figures were not for a typical family.

Mr. Hague: Those are the increased taxes. Now we know why so many people think that the right hon. Gentleman is an out-of-touch and arrogant Prime Minister—those are the taxes that people pay on their petrol, pension, marriage and mortgage which he and the Chancellor have levied. If he does not know that they are now the highest in history, he is in for a shock, because that is what the figures published today by the House of Commons Library will clearly demonstrate. The people hit hardest by his stealth taxes are the poorest in the country. Let him look in his folder for some Government figures from the Office for National Statistics and tell us what proportion of the income of the poorest households was paid in tax when he took office, and what proportion is paid today.

The Prime Minister: First, on mortgages, as a result of getting rid of Tory boom-and-bust economics—*[Interruption.]* let me give the right hon. Gentleman the facts. Under the previous Conservative Government, interest rates averaged 10 per cent; under this Government, they have averaged 6 per cent. That is a saving of £1,000 a year for the average family.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to fuel tax, and we have done a little research on that. In the previous Parliament, fuel tax was raised by more during the period of office of the Government of whom he was a member than it has been raised in this Parliament.

As for the tax burden on ordinary families, the working families tax credit is the best thing that has happened to lower income families for years. However, the right hon. Gentleman is committed to getting rid of it. The £16 billion worth of spending cuts—that is the Tory commitment, which he can deny if he dare—would hit schools, hospitals, police and transport. Labour is the party that is standing up for hard-working families. The right hon. Gentleman is the leader of a party that would return them to boom and bust.

Mr. Hague: That would be a fine answer if this were Prime Minister's waffle time, but it is Prime Minister's Question Time. The figures from the Office for National Statistics show that in 1997 the poorest fifth of households paid 37p of every pound of income in tax, and now pay 40p to the Chancellor, which is another record.

These people thought that the Government would help them, and they have been utterly betrayed. One reason for that is that petrol tax increases have hit the poorest people. What was the tax—will the Prime Minister tell us properly and factually this time—on a litre of petrol when he took office, and what is it today?

The Prime Minister: I have already said that the tax on a litre of petrol increased in the previous Parliament by more than it has in this Parliament. As the right hon. Gentleman is saying that he would cut the duty on fuel, how come that in between the Budget and the protests he never gave that commitment? I shall quote from his interview on GMTV on 13 September, when he said:

> We wouldn't cut taxes today because there's been a protest yesterday. You can't run the country like that.

Absolutely right, we cannot.

Whatever we can do on fuel, it cannot be at the expense of people's mortgages increasing or being unable to do something for pensioners, or being unable to meet the commitment to invest in public services, which is vital.

The right hon. Gentleman's policies—the £16 billion worth of cuts and boom-and-bust economics—would return us to the position of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Conservatives destroyed the homes of millions of working families, when they put them out of work, when they sent their mortgages through the roof and when they increased their taxes. The country never wants to go back to those days.

Mr. Hague: We have not had a single straight or factual answer to a question. The tax on a litre of fuel has been increased by the Prime Minister from 46p to 61p, the fastest rise in three years in the history of the country. Is it not clear that the right hon. Gentleman has given us the fastest rise in petrol prices, the biggest tax rise for the least well-off and the highest tax burden in the history of the country? He is the Prime Minister of the heaviest taxes, the largest increases, the deepest distortions and the shallowest answers ever in the history of Britain.

The Prime Minister: As I have said—the right hon. Gentleman has not disputed this—fuel duties rose more in the previous Parliament than they have during this Parliament. However, there is another point. It is important for families to have economic stability after the years of boom and bust, and we are delivering that for them. It is important also that we have more people in work, and there are 1 million more in work today than there were a few years ago. Further, it is important that we get investment in our schools, hospitals and transport system, and we are getting that.

In addition, it is important that we do something for the poorest people in our country. That is why the new deal, the working families tax credit, the rises in child benefit and the extra help for child care are important. On each of these things, there is the clearest possible choice between the political parties. There is stability under Labour and the highest levels ever of employment, or a return to boom and bust under the right hon. Gentleman, and 3 million unemployed. The choice is between investment in our public services or cuts under him. The choice is between help for the poorest families or cuts to the new deal, to the working families tax credit and even—the Conservatives admitted this today—to free television licences for the over-75s. When those choices are put before the country, the right hon. Gentleman's jokes will not be enough. When it comes down to policy, he gets it wrong every time.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Some hon. Members have said that they cannot hear. Hon. Members on both sides of the House should give the Prime Minister and other right hon. and hon. Members a hearing.

Q2. [133668] **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): Is my right hon. Friend aware that people from my constituency are among those most at risk in the country from dying early from coronary heart disease? Although I welcome the new £50,000 chest pain clinic that will open in our local hospital in January, can he assure me that the Government will invest more in coronary heart care through a national health service that is free at the point of delivery and based on medical need, and not through madcap private medical insurance schemes proposed by the Conservative party that are based on ability to pay?

The Prime Minister: I can assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to put the largest ever investment into the health service. That is one reason why, as a BBC survey revealed today, 90 per cent. of health authorities believe that they are better prepared for the winter because there will be more available beds and more nurses.

Again, the choice could not be clearer: the Conservatives plan to spend £700 million just by giving tax relief to people who already have private medical insurance. Let me explain so that people understand what that would mean: all the extra help for this winter—the beds, nurses and planning—would be lost. We need a national health service fit for all the country, not simply a private sector for the few.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): The Prime Minister said to the leader of the Conservative party that he wanted to give more support to our pensioners. The whole House would agree with that. Will he acknowledge that when people in this country reach the age of 80, they receive, under his policies, the princely sum of an extra 25p a week? Does he agree with the Minister of State, Department of Social Security—his pensions Minister—who described that as an insult and

> a festering sore on the National Insurance System?

If so, will he do something about it?

The Prime Minister: I like to think that we have done something about it. The £150 winter fuel allowance and free television licences for pensioners over the age of 75 show that we are helping people already. No one could possibly claim—and I do not—that the supplement to

people at the age of 80 greatly assists them but, having done a significant amount for pensioners in this Parliament, I hope that we can do more.

Mr. Kennedy: I think that the House hopes that, next week, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor will do more. As his pensions Minister acknowledged, many people of that age send the 25p back

because they feel insulted by it.

If the pensions Minister believes that the Government are insulting pensioners, the Government must do something about it. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell his Chancellor—and strengthen his resolve—that next week the country and the Commons will be looking for a good deal more support, especially for our elderly pensioners?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the country will be looking for that support, but I do not think that anyone has ever pretended that the supplement at the age of 80 is additional or proper recompense for pensioners of that age. [HON. MEMBERS: "Change it."] There are all sorts of ways to get more financial help to pensioners. I have outlined some of our measures. The Chancellor has, of course, already introduced the minimum income guarantee for the very poorest pensioners. It is worth again pointing out that about 500,000 pensioners in this country, usually elderly women whose husbands may not have made proper contributions or who have not themselves made contributions, do not get a basic state pension. Obviously we wanted to help those people first. We now recognise that we need to do more for those who may be above benefit levels and who have saved all their lives, and we will do that.

I would add one further thing. We are talking about a surplus and how we use it for the best benefit of the country. It is worth reflecting, however, that a few years ago, we were not talking about a surplus. We had a doubled national debt and a £28 billion borrowing requirement. Whatever we do, we must make sure that it is limited by what is sensible in the overall interests of the economy. If we simply treat the surplus as something that we can spend overnight, without thinking about tomorrow, we will repeat exactly the mistakes that the country made in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What started off in 1989 as big tax cuts and big spending increases very soon ended in recession, job losses, spending cuts and, finally, tax rises.

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is wrong for the fuel protesters to go under the banner of the Jarrow crusade? If those protesters are so considerate of their fellow working man, should not people ask where they were in the 1980s, during the miners strike? Furthermore, is not the destitution experienced by the Jarrow marchers and their families during the 1930s incomparable with the relative prosperity that exists today? Is not the proposed action a cheap publicity stunt?

The Prime Minister: The circumstances of the Jarrow march were completely different. I make two additional points to my hon. Friend. First, however strongly the protesters feel, it cannot be right for them to try and demonstrate their feelings by interfering with the country's food supplies or bringing the country to a halt. That is not a responsible way to behave, no matter how strongly they feel.

Secondly, it is important for the protesters to realise that were we to accede to their demands, that would have one of three effects, without any doubt whatever: interest rates, and therefore people's mortgages, would go up, or there would be less scope for helping pensioners, or we would have to reduce spending on public services. We will do what we can, but we will not do anything that puts at risk the strength of the economy or the support for essential public services.

Q3. [133669] **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): First, I thank the Prime Minister for visiting my constituency two weeks ago to commemorate the death of a police officer, PC Kalwant Sidhu, killed pursuing criminals in Twickenham.

Secondly, on the law and order theme, is the Prime Minister aware of the evidence that was presented to Parliament yesterday by senior oil industry executives of 180 documented cases of violent intimidation by some of the people whom the leader of the Conservative party described as fine, upstanding Englishmen? Can the House have an assurance that if there is further disruption by the fuel protesters involving intimidation or blockage of the public highway, the police will act quickly and decisively to uphold the law?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the police will act quickly and decisively, but it is wrong that they should be put in such a situation. As I said a moment ago, we have a right of protest and demonstration in this country, but people should protest in a way that is lawful and that does not bring the entire country to a halt. That cannot be right. Whatever people feel about the price of fuel, it is important that the demonstrations take place in a way that is responsible, not extreme and irresponsible.

Q4. [133670] **Mr. Peter Bradley** (The Wrekin): Is the Prime Minister aware that since May 1997 there are an additional 47 teachers in classrooms in The Wrekin, and 37 additional classroom assistants? Is he aware that that is one of the reasons why standards of numeracy and literacy are rising, and why there is now not a single five, six or seven-year-old anywhere in The Wrekin or in Shropshire in a class of more than 30? Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending the education authorities of Telford, The Wrekin and Shropshire county council, and above all the governors and teachers in the schools, who are delivering that change?

Will he please acknowledge also that every welcome initiative from the Department for Education and Employment brings with it a bureaucratic burden on teachers, from which they desperately need to be released so that they can do their best work, which is in the classroom?

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that there is always a tension between the desire to make sure that the initiatives are carried through and that teachers are not overburdened with paperwork.

On class sizes, I pay tribute to the schools, and especially the teachers who have managed the process of change. According to today's figures, some 450,000 fewer

infants are in classes of more than 30. That is a fantastic achievement, which has been made possible only by the extra investment that we have put in. We announced in September the best primary school results that the country has ever had. That, too, was made possible only by the investment that we have made. That is why it is so important that we make the extra investment in education and that we do not follow the Conservative party's path, which would lead to cutting that investment.

Q5. [133671] **Mr. Richard Spring** (West Suffolk): Is the Prime Minister aware of the anxiety of frail and elderly people in East Anglia? Since the summer, they have had to endure circumstances in which the hospitals in the region have been on red alert because of an admissions crisis. Does he know that the number of blocked beds in Suffolk hospitals is now at an all-time high due to the dehumanising incompetence of the county council, which is Labour led, but propped up by the Liberal Democrats?

The Prime Minister: I shall get back to the hon. Gentleman on the specific question about his health authority; I think that he has given a one-sided view of what has happened there.

In general terms, it is important that we make additional investment in the health service. The investment in extra nurses, doctors, hospital buildings, information technology and critical care beds is important. However, the Government are committed to making that investment in the health service whereas the hon. Gentleman's party is committed to cutting it.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): The Prime Minister will know that two young people from Armthorpe in my constituency died tragically from vCJD. It has now emerged that a third victim also had close links with Armthorpe. In view of that, can my right hon. Friend assure me that potential clusters of vCJD cases will be fully investigated and that the results will be made public as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: At the moment, an investigation into the so-called clusters is taking place, and the results will be published. In addition, the Government are establishing a fund, which will benefit sufferers and the families of people who have died. We are therefore trying to ensure that we gauge the exact scale of the problem and whether there is some new variant of CJD. We shall carry on working on that. When the results are available, we will make sure that they are published.

Q6. [133672] **Mr. Tony Baldry** (Banbury): May I ask the Prime Minister a question of which I have given him notice, and that follows on from the previous question? Who, in the machinery of government, now has responsibility for determining policy on risk and hazard in food and health? Who is responsible for promulgating those risks to the public? If the policy should fail at any time in future, what are the criteria for compensation?

The Prime Minister: The latter point will probably have to be judged on each case that arises. On the first point, the Government have overall control of policy, but the purpose of establishing the new Food Standards Agency was to try to improve the transparency of the advice that we get. We have also tried to achieve that with scientific advisory committees, to which we have appointed consumer representatives. I believe that the Food Standards Agency will give us a better objective basis on which we can make the assessments.

However, in government, we will find the balance between risk and the public policy measures to limit it increasingly difficult to strike. That applies across a range of issues. A sensible and reasonable debate about that is a necessary aspect of getting public policy right. BSE is one of the most dramatic instances, but there are other examples of difficult balances to be struck. Whatever the transparency of the information that we give people, difficult public policy judgments remain, and they have to be made by Government. They are more easily made by Government if they are informed by a proper public debate on the balance between risk and policy.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Does the Prime Minister share the profound anxiety of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment about the aspect of the Royal National Institute for the Blind report that dealt with bullying of young people who are blind or have sight impairments? Does he agree that the best response is to consider the complete eradication of bullying by amending the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which would thereby give children the right that adults already have?

The Prime Minister: Perhaps I could write to my right hon. Friend about his last point. As for his first point, it is precisely because we are worried about the impact in schools on those who are blind or partially sighted that we have made additional money available for special educational needs. I hope very much that that money will enable us not just to offer such pupils a better form of teaching, but a better environment in which to be taught.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker—

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am taking a point of order from the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn).

Mr. Flynn: May I ask you, Mr. Speaker, to use your office to intervene in a matter of great importance and urgency?

Under the new Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000, the Government Actuary is obliged to lay before Parliament a report on the effect on the national insurance fund of the likely results of linking the basic pension to the level of earnings up to 2005. I have seen a letter from the Deputy Government Actuary dated 28 September, in which he wrote:

> The report on the financial impact of price and earnings indexation of the basic pension is now at a very advanced stage, and I am hoping to be able to submit it to the Secretary of State next week.

He continued:

> This will enable him to lay it before Parliament when the House returns following the Summer Recess.

Questions have been tabled by three hon. Members, all of whom have received similar replies—one as recently as yesterday—in which the Minister has said:

> The Government Actuary is currently finalising his report. It will be published when it is completed.—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 160W.]

When a member of my staff telephoned the Deputy Government Actuary the day before yesterday and asked him to confirm that the report had not been submitted to the Secretary of State, the Deputy Government Actuary refused to do so. Another Member's office has been told—so the office has reported to me—that the matter will not be laid before the House until after next week's statement.

The matter is of the greatest importance if the House is to make a sensible judgment on changes in the pension, particularly changes in the basic pension and the link with it. In 1934, a Minister delayed a report to the House in similar circumstances, using the pretext of sending the report back—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman was kind enough to notify me of his point of order, but it cannot be a speech. He is making what is almost an Adjournment debate case. I will reply to the point of order now, because it is delaying the business of the House.

I have read the section to which the hon. Gentleman referred. It lays a duty on the Government Actuary to make a report, and on the Government to lay it before the House. It does not say when that must be done. If the hon. Gentleman has views on the matter, he must take it up with Ministers; it is not a matter for the Chair.

Dr. Cable: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Flynn *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: I shall take a point of order from the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable). The hon. Member for Newport, West may wish to intervene on another point of order. He was a bit slow off the mark.

Dr. Cable: May I ask you, Mr. Speaker, for a ruling on a decision made this morning in Westminster Hall? Under the sub judice rule, a Treasury Minister and I were not allowed to refer to an important case involving a large number of our constituents with life insurance policies. It related to orphan assets. What is odd is that that legal case is being widely debated in the national press. Ministers have—rightly—written articles in the *Daily Mail* debating the merits of the case. However, I, as a Member of Parliament, am not allowed to question a Minister in the House on her speech, or on comments outside. How can we perform our role of holding Ministers to account when sub judice rules so inhibit our freedom of expression?

Mr. Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]* I am going to reply to the point of order.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of the point of order. I shall establish the facts of the case to which he refers and will write to him on the matter. I do not think that there is anything to add to that. I shall look into the matter—he cannot get any better than that.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. It is a very small point. I recall that the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege considered this issue, and it is important to clarify the matter. Will you make a ruling and report it to the House, rather than simply corresponding with my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), because issues of considerable importance have been raised?

Mr. Speaker: I shall consider the hon. Gentleman's suggestion.

Mr. Flynn *rose*—

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon) *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: I shall go back to Mr. Flynn.

Mr. Flynn: Further to my point of order, Mr. Speaker. As the defender of Back Benchers' rights, can you advise me how a Back Bencher should proceed after he has raised a matter in the presence of 200 other hon. Members and the Prime Minister, asked for support and information and raised the matter with other Ministers in written questions? Who should he go to then to seek advice on information that is essential to do our job? Should he go to the Speaker, or should he go elsewhere?

Mr. Speaker: I have known the hon. Gentleman for many years and, if I were seeking to raise any matter in the House, I would probably go to him for advice. *[Laughter.]*

Sir Peter Emery: Now follow that.

Further to the point of order that was raised by the hon. Members for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), Mr. Speaker. The House has been worried for a considerable time not just about the specific issue that is before you, but about the overall position of the sub judice rule, given that so many matters are already in the press and being discussed on television and elsewhere. The sub judice rule obviously had a major influence when the media did not discuss matters that were before the courts, but I now wonder how great that influence is. Could you and the Clerks consider whether there should be some new thinking about the sub judice rule and whether that could be done by a Committee of the House or yourself? There is a need to consider the matter further.

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has given me food for thought, but we must consider the rights of the individual; we must always worry about that.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I should be most grateful to you for your guidance. Can you advise me whether the prohibition on tabling written questions that seek to extract Ministers' interpretation of treaty articles also applies to oral questions?

Mr. Speaker: The same rules apply. I hope that the hon. Gentleman understands that reply.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Further to the point of order on orphan assets, Mr. Speaker. Could we not distinguish between a matter that involves a specific case that is before the courts and a general discussion of what the public policy should be in relation to orphan assets?

Mr. Speaker: My understanding is that that distinction is recognised under the rule.

Companies Act (Amendment)

3.39 pm

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the law to require directors of public companies, in cases where there is a takeover, to have regard to the interests of employees as well as shareholders.

As this is the first time that I have had the opportunity to address the House since your election, Mr. Speaker, may I congratulate you on it and pass on every good wish for the future?

As this may be the last time that I present a Bill to the House, may I say how important a subject I still believe greater industrial democracy to be?

I entered the House 26 years ago directly from manufacturing industry. At that time, as now, the contribution of the employee was at least as great as that of capital to the survival and success of any company.

When a business goes to the wall, a shareholder may lose £10,000, and that hurts. The employee loses his or her whole livelihood, yet the whole structure of company law gives rights to those who own the capital but virtually no rights to those who do the work.

The responsibilities of company directors are, in practice, overwhelmingly towards the so-called "members" of the company. That means the shareholders. In the final analysis, any responsibility towards the work force is tenuous and unenforceable in law. The Bill's objective is to redress the balance, particularly in circumstances arising from a company takeover.

Before I go into the detail of the Bill, I cite two instances to support the need for change. Twenty years ago, in my home town of Caernarfon, one of the two large employers in the area was a company called Bernard Wardle, which made PVC products, mainly for the motor industry. There was a takeover. Although the Caernarfon plant was both viable and profitable, it was closed and the work was moved to other factories owned by the new holding company. That work filled spare capacity in those other plants.

The work force at Caernarfon were thrown on to the industrial scrap heap at the whim of the directors of the predator company. Three hundred people were made redundant. The tragedy is that so little has changed in the past 20 years: the factory still stands largely unoccupied, and some of the work force still have not found permanent on-going employment. The structure of company law that allowed such a travesty to occur is still largely in place. That is one case from two decades ago whose shadow remains over my home town—a shadow cast by those absentee directors who cared not one jot for the work force's future.

All directors do not behave in that way. As always, a change in the law is needed to safeguard against worst practice. However, more enlightened directors who want to safeguard the position of employees need to be protected in law if they so act.

A more recent case is still in progress: the takeover of Hyder plc, the main water service provider in Wales. It has recently been subjected to a contested takeover battle. I do not pretend for one moment that the Hyder case is analogous to that of Bernard Wardle, although it could be. Hyder has substantial debts, not least because of the windfall tax and the price regime laid down by

[Mr. Dafydd Wigley]

the regulator. Two companies were involved in rival takeover bids for Hyder this summer. Without going into the merits of the two bids, the effect of the auction was to push up the offer to shareholders. The valuation per share went up from £2.60 to £3.65, which reflected a total cost to the buyer increasing by £160 million.

The bottom line is that that money must be recouped. The price charged for water is fixed by the regulator, so the only way of recouping the money is by cutting costs. That means a reduction in staff, a worse service to the customer, less investment in the infrastructure or the environment, or a combination of all three of those elements.

Concern was expressed by the National Assembly for Wales, across party political boundaries, that an excessively generous deal for the shareholders could lead to massive job losses in Wales and a worse service for the consumer. Indeed, the water services could be transferred from Wales, with both the customer and the work force paying the price.

I hasten to add that that has not happened yet, but it could still happen. If it does, there will be holy hell to pay in Wales. As you know, Mr. Speaker, water is quite an inflammatory subject in Wales. If our worst forebodings come to pass, the fault will lie not just with directors of the companies who might take such a decision—the very structure of company law, which has been enacted by the House, will be to blame. In our infinite wisdom, we have placed a responsibility on company directors to safeguard the well-being of the shareholder, but we have not enacted an equivalent responsibility to safeguard the well-being of the employee.

There are words in law that appear to cover that, but, in practice, they give no protection. I refer to the legislation that I wish to amend by virtue of the Bill. Section 309(1) of the Companies Act 1985 stipulates:

> The matters to which the directors of a company are to have regard in the performance of their functions include the interests of the company's employees in general, as well as the interests of its members.

That sounds all fine and dandy, but immediately following section 309(1) is section 309(2), which states:

> Accordingly, the duty imposed by this section on the directors is owed by them to the company (and the company alone).

"The company" means the shareholders. Thus there is no legally enforceable duty to the employees. The Government were expected to undertake a company law review, which would have introduced a stakeholder law. There has been a review, but so far it has led to nothing. It is more than a year since David Wheeler resigned from the company law review because his concept of a third way was firmly crushed.

There are arguments for taking a genuinely pluralist approach to the issue, which recognises the role of all stakeholders, including workers and employees, and for what is quaintly called "enlightened shareholder value", which provides little change from the current position and is the line that the Government seem to support. When David Wheeler resigned, he said:

> It strikes me as faintly absurd that a company law review initiated by a modernising government should end up with such a timid and conservative approach.

The time has come for the House to catch up with the reality of the 20th century and the structures of industry before we go much further into the 21st century. My Bill would amend section 309(2) of the Companies Act 1985 so that it states:

> The duty owed by directors is owed by them to the company and to the employees of the company.

That would cut out the words "and the company alone" and would specify that responsibility must be exercised, particularly during takeover bids.

Hon. Members of all parties support the Bill, and I urge the House to allow it a First Reading, thereby conveying to all employees that the House regards them as full and equal partners in the new industrial age. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Dafydd Wigley, Mr. Kevin Barron, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Mr. Paul Flynn, Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones, Mr. Richard Livsey, Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, Mr. Andrew Mackinlay, Mr. Lembit Öpik, Mr. Andrew Rowe, Rev. Martin Smyth and Mr. Simon Thomas.

Companies Act (Amendment)

Mr. Dafydd Wigley accordingly presented a Bill to amend the law to require directors of public companies, in cases where there is a takeover, to have regard to the interests of employees as well as shareholders: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 10 November, and to be printed [Bill 177].

Defence and the Armed Forces

[Relevant documents: Second Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 158, on the Ministry of Defence Annual Reporting Cycle, and the Government's response thereto, HC 452;

Fifth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 100, on the Defence Geographic and Imagery Intelligence Agency, and the Government's response thereto, HC 629;

Eighth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 264, on European Security and Defence, and the Government's response thereto, HC 732;

Thirteenth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 433, on the Iraqi No-Fly Zones, and the Government's response thereto, HC 930;

Fourteenth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 347-I, on Lessons of Kosovo.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

3.48 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): It is a privilege to come to the House for the second time in less than a week to debate defence issues. I take this opportunity to welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy (Dr. Moonie), to his rightful place on the Government Benches.

Last week, our focus was on procurement, and I will have still more to say on that subject in a moment. However, our debate today is on the armed forces, of whom we are all justly proud. They do an outstanding job for this country around the world and it is entirely appropriate that the House should devote this debate to a full and thorough discussion of their role and activities over the past year.

The last 12 months have been demanding for our armed forces, but they have responded to their many challenges professionally, with great dedication and with outstanding courage and personal sacrifice. British forces have continued to play an essential role in Bosnia and Kosovo. A year ago, the Kosovo campaign was still fresh in our minds, and our focus was on consolidating the peace that had been won through the allies' successful military campaign last summer. That meant returning more than 1.3 million refugees and displaced people to their homes and villages. Today, more than 800,000 refugees have returned home, the people of Kosovo have taken part in the country's first ever free and fair elections to choose their own representatives, schools in Kosovo have reopened with Albanian children being taught in their own language, and Slobodan Milosevic, who drove tens of thousands of Kosovans from their homes, has himself been driven from power by his own people.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): The Secretary of State will undoubtedly be aware that, this morning, it was revealed to the Select Committee on Defence that the extremely political attack by a senior uniformed officer, Sir John Day, on the Defence Committee report on Kosovo was made under pressure. Today, in an open sitting of the Committee, Sir John revealed that he had not chosen to give that interview, but was asked—indeed, pressed—to do so. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether he intends to continue to use uniformed officers to fight his political battles?

Mr. Hoon: I know Sir John extremely well and, of all the people whom I can think of in the armed forces, he is one of those who are least likely to respond to pressure of any type. The hon. Gentleman is, therefore, absolutely wrong in that assertion.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): To settle any disquiet, will the right hon. Gentleman undertake to conduct an inquiry into the matter and to report back on exactly what happened?

Mr. Hoon: I do not see the necessity for an inquiry. I make it quite clear that Sir John—as anyone who knows him will confirm—is simply not a man to respond to that type of pressure. I am afraid that the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) is wrong in his assertion.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): It was me who asked Sir John whether he voluntarily instigated or was told to instigate *The Sunday Times* article. His answer was quite clear and specific: he was told to do so. I should be interested to know whether the Secretary of State or the Chief of the Defence Staff gave that instruction to Sir John. Sir John left the Committee in no doubt today that he instigated that article at the request of someone else.

Mr. Hoon: The two Select Committee members should get their story straight, because we are now hearing two different versions of events. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Opposition Members are not thinking very quickly and carefully about what has just been said.

On the one hand, it has been suggested that a serving officer was subject to some type of pressure. That is an allegation that I most strongly resist. On the other hand, it is being suggested that a serving officer was made to respond to a request from the media for an interview. That is an entirely routine matter, occurring very regularly in the Ministry of Defence. I am really surprised that the hon. Member for Canterbury is raising that as an issue.

Mr. Hancock: The Secretary of State is being deliberately mischievous in trying to mislead the House even further. The point that I was making—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I should not think that the Minister, or any other right hon. or hon. Member, would seek to mislead the House. I take it that the hon. Gentleman wishes to withdraw that remark?

Mr. Hancock: Indeed, Mr. Speaker, on your advice, I certainly do. However, I should not like the impression to be given by any hon. Member that Sir John did anything today other than to confirm that he did not instigate the interview of his volition, but was asked to instigate it. He could have been asked to do that only by a senior politician or a senior person at the Ministry of Defence, such as the Chief of the Defence Staff.

Will the Secretary of State say whether he knew that Sir John had been asked to participate in the interview? If he knew, did he play a role in the making of that request? If he did not play a role, will he investigate who did ask Sir John to participate in the article—which was wholly inaccurate and totally misrepresented the Defence Committee's views.

Mr. Hoon: I make it quite clear to the House that I have no specific knowledge of who made the request.

[Mr. Hoon]

However, the hon. Gentleman is making heavy weather of a very basic situation. It routinely happens that uniformed officers are asked whether they are willing to speak to journalists. I do not regard that as surprising or remarkable in a democratic society. It is then a matter for the officer concerned to decide whether he or she will accept such an invitation. I make it quite clear that that is absolutely routine, and that there is nothing surprising about it at all.

I resisted the earlier suggestion that there was some pressure. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) is suggesting not that there was pressure, but that a request was made—of which I have no personal specific knowledge—and dealt with in the usual way inside the Ministry of Defence, and Sir John Day responded. That is not a surprising matter; indeed, it is entirely routine.

Mr. Brazier: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman will set the story straight, I will.

Mr. Brazier: The technology in the House does not yet enable us to have a hard transcript in front of us. However, if the Secretary of State looks at the televised proceedings, he will be left in no doubt that Sir John Day gave the impression that he was under pressure. Furthermore, Sir John gave the Committee information on a variety of matters concerning the Kosovo operation—which the Chairman of the Committee indicated we are likely to follow up later—that was significantly at variance with earlier testimony from Ministers and uniformed witnesses.

Mr. Hoon: I will invite Sir John Day to consider meeting the hon. Gentleman. If he chooses to accept my invitation, I will leave it to the hon. Gentleman to judge whether Sir John Day is a man who responds to that kind of pressure.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): I was not present and, therefore, like the Secretary of State, I will have to rely on the no doubt accurate transcript of what was asked and answered. However, there is another point which may give rise to concern. A Select Committee publishes a report and expects to have a Government response. Is there not some risk that, if senior officers begin to make comments before the Government have made a formal response to a Select Committee report, that will get in the way of the proper relationship between the Select Committee and the Ministers whom it holds to account?

Mr. Hoon: I make it clear that the Government will be responding in due course to the Select Committee report. I hope that that is sufficient on this subject.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: I hope in vain.

Mr. Blunt: What is at issue here is the use of uniformed officers, who clearly have authority and expertise, in the service of Government information. A journalist asking for information—and being given access to expert advice from officers from all over the armed services—is quite different from Ministers and officials in the Department expecting uniformed officers to take part in a propaganda exercise for the Government of the day. That has happened continuously with regard to the Kosovo campaign. I hope that the Secretary of State will understand that this issue is of great concern to the armed forces and to those outside, as it borders on the abuse of military members of the armed forces. I hope that the Secretary of State will cease doing it.

Mr. Hoon: Let me make it quite clear to the hon. Gentleman—it did not happen. He should know better than to stand up in the House of Commons and make assertions that he cannot substantiate, particularly when he has heard me deny any suggestion that the officer was put under any kind of pressure. If the hon. Gentleman wants a civilised debate, he should refrain from making such allegations when he knows full well that I have previously denied that the officer was put under pressure from my office. I have made that absolutely clear.

Mr. Blunt *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman is going to apologise for the assertion that he made, I will give way.

Mr. Blunt: I was not referring to what happened with Sir John Day. I was not there, so I do not know what happened. It has been put on the record and the record will attest to it. I was referring to what happened at the beginning of the Kosovo campaign when the Chief of the Defence Staff wrote three articles in the space of a week advocating the Government's position, which was plainly at variance with the military advice that he was giving to the Secretary of State at the time.

Mr. Hoon: I do not accept that. The hon. Gentleman must appreciate that if he gets up and makes assertions following on from one of his colleagues on a particular subject, it is not unreasonable for people to think that he is talking about the same subject. I resist absolutely any suggestion that uniformed officers were used for propaganda purposes on behalf of the Government. That is absurd and it is not the case.

Mr. Hancock: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Hoon: No, I am going to make progress. We have spent far too long on this subject.

The armed forces have played a major role. Over the past year, they have helped create the stability that has allowed roads, power stations, bridges and railways to be repaired. They have also played a vital role in protecting and reassuring minorities. In these and many other ways, our forces continue to apply their skill and experience to help the people of Kosovo rebuild their communities.

Some people still suggest that we were wrong to have fought the Kosovo campaign. Such a judgment flies in the face of the evidence. British forces made a huge contribution to the success of the NATO operation.

Everything we were asked to do, we did. Although it listed a number of problems, many of which we do not accept, the recent Defence Committee report acknowledged

Operation Allied Force can fairly be counted a success.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh) *rose—*

Mr. William Cash (Stone) *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: I shall give way in a moment.

There are, of course, lessons to learn. There has never been a campaign anywhere or at any time when that was not the case. Over the past year, with the progress we have made on European defence, the announcements on sea lift and air lift, new secure communications for the Royal Air Force and new precision-guided munitions, we have acted quickly to implement the required reforms.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): My question is on Kosovo, a province that I visited along with other members of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. How many Ministry of Defence police officers are serving with the international police force? Is it not the case that such police officers can serve a six-month rather than a 12-month tour of duty? Does that not make it more attractive for our officers to serve in Kosovo?

Mr. Hoon: I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me, but I do not have the precise figure to hand. However, I will certainly write to him. Any change that we can make by way of service intervals to make such tours of duty more attractive will be useful.

Our forces have not only been part of international operations in Bosnia and Kosovo; British troops have played a leading part in promoting stability and providing support to the United Nations peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone. In May, following renewed fighting between Government and rebel forces in Sierra Leone, British armed forces moved at very short notice to secure Lungi airport to allow the evacuation of British nationals and other entitled people, and to enable the United Nations to bring in reinforcements.

Forces from all three services under joint command deployed rapidly to a country halfway across the world, arriving within hours of the final decision to go. At the peak of the mission, more than 5,000 personnel were involved. Having achieved the clear objectives that we set at the outset, we withdrew our combat forces. Conducted in difficult circumstances, the operation was without doubt an unqualified success.

Mr. Chidgey: May I join the Secretary of State in congratulating the performance of our troops in Kosovo and Sierra Leone? I visited Kosovo with the Foreign Affairs Committee, and was delighted to see how well the troops had done, particularly as we were, in the main, first in. The Royal Green Jackets and the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, both from my area, performed exceptionally well. However, the underlying concern, now and in the future, is that the troops performed amazingly well, with great credit to this country, but had to overcome many problems in the logistics and lack of preparedness exposed in the Defence Committee's report. I seek an assurance that, in the theatres of the Balkans, and in Sierra Leone where the right anti-malarial tablets were not available, the Secretary of State is taking a personal interest—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I appeal again for short interventions—let us not have mini speeches.

Mr. Hoon: I made it clear that there are lessons to be learned in any campaign. That has always been true in history, and it will be the case in the future. We will respond specifically to the Select Committee report. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will implement the lessons learned, as we have begun to do already. It is not surprising that there are difficulties—these are difficult and dangerous campaigns. We must study what went wrong, if things went wrong.

Mr. Cash: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Hoon: I am going to make some progress.

The Government will see through their commitment to Sierra Leone. We are determined to help to turn that country around. We do not want the people of Sierra Leone to be once again subject to rebel brutality. Our most important contribution is undoubtedly our extensive programme to provide the Sierra Leone army with the skills and training that it needs to underpin the authority of the democratically elected Government. This is not a short-term commitment—our original plans for the international training team envisaged a three-year programme.

We have temporarily increased the level of support we have given since June, by providing a series of short-term training teams. We expect, however, to be reducing the number of personnel we have committed to training in Sierra Leone from next spring.

We have also increased our support to the United Nations peacekeeping force. At the UN's request, we now have staff officers working in the UNAMSIL headquarters, and we have reaffirmed our readiness to deploy elements of our rapid reaction force to support UN peacekeeping missions, including Sierra Leone.

In case there were any doubt that we take this commitment seriously, I announced to the House on Monday that, for a limited period, we shall divert an amphibious-ready group, comprising elements of our joint rapid reaction forces, off Sierra Leone. This deployment is a practical demonstration of our rapid reaction capability and our practical support for Sierra Leone.

Our involvement with Sierra Leone has not been without cost. In September, British forces took part in an extraordinarily brave and daring rescue of the Royal Irish Regiment soldiers who had been taken hostage. I am sure that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the skill, courage and professionalism of the forces involved. In particular, I would like to pay tribute to Bombardier Brad Tinnion, the soldier who died in that operation, and to the others who were injured.

We had exhausted every possible opportunity to resolve the hostage-taking through peaceful means, but when it eventually became clear that that would not be possible, and that the lives of the hostages were at risk, we were right to act. I believe that few, if any, other forces could have achieved what British armed forces did that day. It was a remarkable achievement.

[Mr. Hoon]

Our forces are professionals. They are trained to deal with danger. That is something our that Royal Air Force pilots have confronted routinely over the past year. Our pilots, along with coalition partners, have continued to patrol the northern and southern no-fly zones over Iraq throughout the year in support of UN Security Council Resolution 688. We have been doing this successfully for nearly 10 years, including right through the Kosovo campaign.

Let me be quite clear—these patrols are humanitarian. Saddam Hussein has used helicopter gun ships against the Kurdish population in the north, and both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gun ships against the Shia Muslims of the south. There is no reason to believe that he would not do that again if we ceased our efforts.

Since the beginning of last year, there have been more than 235 violations of the no-fly zones by Saddam's forces, and more than 900 other direct threats against our aircrew, including missile attacks and anti-aircraft fire. Saddam has even offered a bounty for shooting down coalition aircraft.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): What my right hon. Friend says about the Shia is nonsense but, apart from that, he mentioned the recent hijacking. Yes, the confrontation with Saddam has gone on for 10 long years, with no result in sight. Would not it have been at least a bit graceful to have entered into some kind of dialogue with the Iraqis, after they had been so quick to give up the hostages?

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry, but I must disagree with my hon. Friend. The reality is that any negotiations along the lines that he suggests would be regarded by Saddam Hussein as a sign of weakness. We would simply be giving in to his appalling behaviour, and that would not advance by a single step the cause of international law, to which I know my hon. Friend is committed.

Our aircrew show great courage and professionalism in the face of the threats. They are authorised to respond in self defence. They do so within the bounds of international law, and attack only those military targets posing a threat to coalition forces. They go to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties.

Saddam has claimed that civilian casualties have been widespread, but on nearly 30 occasions when he says that civilians have been killed, we know that no bombs were actually dropped. Our actions are right and we will continue to maintain our patrols over Iraq for as long as it is necessary to do so.

We also have a destroyer or frigate permanently deployed in the Gulf region. That contributes to the multinational interception force that operates under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council to enforce sanctions against Iraq. At the same time, Britain is playing a leading role in trying to make progress on Security Council resolution 1284. As many right hon. and hon. Members will know, that resolution offers Saddam an opportunity to lead his country away from isolation and a suspension of sanctions in return for progress on the remaining disarmament issues. Saddam has a clear choice between international isolation and a return to the international community.

I have described its role in the Gulf, but this year has been an especially busy one for the Royal Navy. At the start of the year, Opposition Members entertained themselves by claiming, quite wrongly, that the Navy was unable to go about its business because we did not have enough money to buy fuel.

Since then, there has been a major, around-the-world deployment of naval forces, which return to Britain later this month. Naval task group 2000 visited over 30 countries, from Vietnam to Venezuela. The Illustrious carrier task group deployed to the Gulf, before diverting to Sierra Leone on its way home. In September, the Invincible carrier task group was involved in a major series of amphibious exercises in the Mediterranean with friends and allies.

When the fleet returns to port at the end of this year, it will not be because it has run out of fuel, but because it deserves a well-earned rest. Where there are equipment problems, we have been putting them right.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Secretary of State says that we were the only ones who had fun about the fuel issue. It was not fun at all. Will he confirm that the Navy's annual fuel budget was cut by 30 per cent. and then had to be reinstated, which was the cause of the problem that meant that ships could not leave port at Christmas?.

Mr. Hoon: I do not accept that for a moment.

The House will be aware that the United Kingdom hunter-killer nuclear submarine fleet was recalled recently for checks to be made on their reactor systems to determine whether they had the same defect as HMS Tireless. I can now update the House on the present position.

The inspections have shown that there is no evidence of the problem in five submarines. Although four of them were already alongside undergoing repair, maintenance or refit, this means that HMS Triumph, which has the capability to launch Tomahawk missiles, will return to operational duties very shortly.

Analysis of more detailed inspections will allow a recovery programme to be set in place for those submarines that are affected. We aim to have that established by the end of November. In the short term, HMS Triumph's availability means that we are much better placed to conduct operations, including those in support of the deterrent.

I have set out many of the ways in which British forces continue to make an important contribution to preventing conflict and ensuring greater security around the world.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): The matter of the submarines is enormously important. The news that the Secretary of State just gave the House is encouraging to some extent, but can we be absolutely clear what the position is? How many submarines have been found to be suffering from the same defect that brought HMS Tireless into port? How many will need extensive repair work? If he does not know the answer to that question now, within what time scale will he be able to inform the House?

Mr. Hoon: There is a programme of inspections. The reason why we were so determined that the inspections should take place as quickly as possible was concern that

there was a generic design fault in the construction of the reactor. That appears not to be the case. In five of the boats we have not been able to find that particular problem. One of them will be very shortly available for deployment. We are continuing with more detailed inspections of the remaining vessels and I will certainly bring the House up to date as and when I have more specific information available.

I emphasise that our forces also play a vital role closer to home. Even with progress in the peace process, Northern Ireland remains our single largest operational commitment. While no one should underestimate the difficulties that lie ahead, it would be equally wrong to play down the progress already made towards a peaceful settlement. The political process has enabled us, on advice from the Chief Constable, to bring our force levels down to around 13,500, the lowest figure for almost 30 years. I look forward to the conditions being in place that will allow us to reduce our forces further still, but we are not yet there.

All of the important work that our forces undertake on our behalf depends on one thing—the quality of our people. It is the men and women who make up our forces who deliver time after time. The Government have built and sustained a strong economy. This allows us to invest in Britain's health, education and transport. In addition, because the economy is so strong, we are able to provide more resources for defence: an extra £1.25 billion over the next three years. A strong economy means that we must work even harder to recruit and retain the people we need to make sure that our forces remain the best in the world. This is a huge challenge.

Mr. Cash: Does the Secretary of State agree that intelligence is of great importance to our defence and the security of our forces? Is he aware that serious disquiet is growing in the United States and the Pentagon about the developments in European defence and security policy—the European security and defence identity in particular. Given what he said about the lessons that had to be learned and in view of the leaking of NATO secrets by the French during the Kosovo war, will he give the House an assurance that the military intelligence arrangements with the United States will remain as good as they ever have been in the past 50 years?

Mr. Hoon: I am delighted to be able to give the House that assurance, but I will be dealing in more detail with European defence later in my speech.

The recruitment of sufficient numbers of suitably qualified, strongly motivated young people is fundamental. The armed forces are one of the United Kingdom's leading employers, particularly of young people, with over 25,000 new recruits each year. Recruitment over the past two years has been buoyant. Last year, there was a net inflow to the full-time trained Army for the first time in 15 years. The overall intake for all three services was about 25,533—96 per cent. of our target. For the fourth consecutive year, the number of women recruited into the armed forces was well in excess of 3,000. More people than ever before from the ethnic minorities are joining the armed forces—although we recognise that we must do even more.

Just as recruitment is fundamental, so is retaining the immense talent that we already have. It should not be a surprise that our people—who are among the most motivated and best trained in the country—are attractive to civilian employers, who can often offer a more stable, if less interesting and exciting, life style.

I realise that there are no easy answers, but we are addressing those issues head-on with our policy for people. To select only a few examples, we are tackling overstretch by reducing commitments; we have greatly improved support to deployed personnel and have substantially expanded their allowance packages; we have implemented the armed forces pay review body recommendations in full, on time and unstaged; and we have set up the service families task force, which is already delivering real benefits for families.

My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces will say more about our wide range of initiatives on retention later in the debate, but it is clear that our policy for people is already helping to make service life a more attractive long-term option for our personnel and their families.

In the longer term, I am absolutely determined that we should do more. However, to establish the armed forces firmly as a career of first choice takes time. It must be based on sustainable policies, not on quick, short-term fixes. However, for the first time we have a highly visible policy for people touching on every aspect of personnel management. That is a major step forward.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, following the report of the National Audit Office on the training of pilots, the low number of junior fast-jet pilots in April 2000 is an especially important issue and that the problem will increase in each of the next three years? Will he assure the House that every effort is being made to put that right?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that matter; it is of great concern to us. There is a particular retention problem with pilots, which we continue to address. I am confident that my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces will cover that matter when he speaks later.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The Secretary of State is aware that, this year, I am taking part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I am delighted to have visited both Canada and Bosnia. My point relates to Bosnia-Herzogovina.

With all the money that the Government have at their disposal, when will they provide troops in Bosnia with living accommodation that meets the standards adopted by all other countries represented in Bosnia? The right hon. Gentleman knows that the Corimex buildings have no air conditioning, and that in summer they are intolerable. After six years of those living conditions, when will they be improved?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the question of accommodation. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces will refer to it. We are concerned about the fact that we do not provide the standard of accommodation for our armed forces that we should do. The Government are urgently and seriously examining the matter to try to make an improvement.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) *rose—*

Mr. Hancock *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: I have given way several times and I want to make progress.

[Mr. Hoon]

The armed forces need and deserve the best equipment, so that they can perform to their full potential. We inherited an equipment programme with strengths, but also some serious weaknesses. The shortfalls identified in the strategic defence review—strategic lift, for example—have been apparent in recent operations. We are now putting them right.

Back in May, I announced a £4 billion package to lease four C17s and to acquire 25 A400M transport planes. That will give us a capability that few others can match. Last Thursday, I announced the provision of six new roll on/roll off ferries to provide strategic sealift for our forces, and the procurement of four new logistics ships to support our amphibious and expeditionary capability. Those orders are worth about £1.25 billion, of which more than £1 billion will be spent in the UK. They are a huge boost to our military capability. That is yet another step towards putting in place the flexible, mobile forces proposed by the SDR. It also means jobs for Scotland, for Northern Ireland and for the north-east—jobs for Britain.

I can tell the House that an important decision has been taken with regard to the main engines for the type 45 destroyer. BAE Systems, the prime contractor, ran a competition to select the pair of gas turbines that will power each warship. Excellent bids were received from Rolls-Royce plc, offering the WR21, and from General Electric Company, offering the LM2500. The prime contractor advised us that both engines met the programme requirements, and that either would be acceptable to the Royal Navy. Therefore, it has been a difficult task to decide between the two bids. On balance, we have decided to select the Rolls-Royce WR21.

The LM2500 is a mature product—it is in volume production and available at an attractive price. We accept that the WR21 presents a greater degree of risk to the programme, but we had to look at a range of other factors. Those factors, many of which fall outside the type 45 programme, include the commonality of support arrangements with existing Rolls-Royce engines in the Royal Navy, and particular aspects of Royal Navy fleetwide operations for which the Rolls-Royce engine is well suited.

Because those wider issues have played such a significant part in our decision process, and because our future plans are not sufficiently certain to allow them to be an element of such a competition, we have decided to set aside the competition and negotiate the contract on a sole-source basis with Rolls-Royce.

Hon. Members should welcome the decision as good news for employment in the United Kingdom, particularly in the main Rolls-Royce facilities in Coventry, Bristol and Derby. Overall, some 1,000 jobs will be sustained as a result of our decision. That is clear evidence that this Government are investing in defence and investing in Britain.

The type 45 itself will, of course, be a large, versatile and highly capable ship, and it will provide a huge increase in capability from the outset. It will provide outstanding air defence in support of operations from war fighting to crisis intervention. We still expect to place a contract in excess of £1 billion, for the first three type 45 destroyers, before the end of the year, although the precise timing will depend on continuing negotiations involving the prime contractor.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Hoon: In a second.

It remains our intention that the first and third ships will be assembled by BAE Systems Marine and the second ship by Vosper Thornycroft. Involving two shipbuilders in the design of the ship will make for effective competition for follow-on ships and reinforces the importance that this Government attach to a strong and competitive warship-building industry in this country. The detailed level of work share between the two yards remains to be decided, but must enable effective downstream competition and provide value for money to the British taxpayer.

Mr. Keetch: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way and for remembering Hereford. On the type 45, the Sylver launcher has been selected as the launcher for the principal anti-air-missile system for the lead ship of the class, but we understand that it can launch the PAAMS missile only. Given the problems that we have had with submarines, would it not be advisable for type 45s to be able to launch, for example, cruise missiles? Will the Secretary of State therefore give the House an assurance that the launcher for the subsequent ships will be capable of launching a type of missile other than PAAMS?

Mr. Hoon: Those are matters that we can review as the programme is developed, but I am absolutely confident that the armaments capability of these very impressive ships will be perfectly sufficient as and when they come into service.

Mr. Chidgey *rose—*

Mr. Hancock *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: I need to make more progress.

The warship is being designed for the future, so it will be capable of incorporating up-to-date technology. While land attack missiles are not currently planned for the type 45, the ship is designed from the outset to allow the fitting of a vertical launcher suitable for a variety of weapons, including Tomahawk. The ship will have sufficient space and facilities to allow its capability to grow through its life. The type 45 will be a world-class ship for a world-class Navy and its success will depend on the world-class design and manufacturing skills of British industry.

Mr. Hancock: Will the Secretary of State give way? It is important for jobs.

Hon. Members: His job.

Mr. Hoon: I am all in favour of preserving jobs. I will certainly give way.

Mr. Hancock: I am delighted that the Secretary of State gave way. On the question of the second type 45,

he is no doubt aware that it is vital to Vospers and to the work force currently at Woolston and the work force to be transferred to Portsmouth. There is a significant problem as the prime contractor is yet to sign and to make a reasonable arrangement with Vospers about the way in which that contract will operate. Will the Secretary of State do all that he can to bring about a decision and to get that contract signed as quickly as possible, so that we can secure those 650 jobs that are currently at risk at Vospers in Woolston and secure the move to Portsmouth as quickly as possible?

Mr. Hoon: Obviously, it is in the Government's interest to have this matter resolved as quickly as possible—that will get the ships in service as quickly as possible. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are making every effort to ensure that the negotiations do not go on for too much longer and that we achieve the result that he and I want to secure for the Royal Navy.

Mr. Chidgey: Will the Secretary of State ensure that, as originally intended, the share of the work between Vosper Thornycroft and BAE Systems Marine will be fair and equal?

Mr. Hoon: That is what we announced and that is what we are seeking to achieve.

This world-beating new equipment is part of the success story that is Britain's defence. We must make sure that our forces, which are the very best, remain so. That involves the modernisation of our forces, which we are achieving in every aspect of what we do, from the organisation of Europe's defence to the command and control of our helicopter and Harrier forces. It all has one aim—to maximise and improve military capability.

I am, therefore, also pleased to announce that the invitation to tender for the new competition for the Bowman communications system will be issued today, which is four weeks earlier than planned. After a rigorous examination of industrial proposals, we will invite bids for the supply and initial support of Bowman from three companies: Computing Devices Canada, TRW and Thomson Racal Defence Ltd. All bidders are expected to offer proposals with significant manufacturing work and vehicle conversion in the United Kingdom. That represents a major turnaround for Bowman. The fact that we have been able quickly to issue the invitation to tender to major companies with good track records in this sector is a clear vindication of our early decision to reopen that competition.

Our programme of equipment improvements has its roots in the strategic defence review. That demonstrates that the SDR is on track. Two years on from the completion of the review, we continue to make excellent progress. Let me mention a few highlights. Elements from the joint rapid reaction forces have already seen action in East Timor and Sierra Leone. Those JRRF provide a pool of forces typically comprising around 20 major warships, 22 other vessels, four brigades, 110 combat aircraft and 160 other aircraft, any of which can be drawn on as situations and circumstances require. They can be deployed quickly around the world and they can deliver a real punch when they arrive.

Joint force Harrier brings together all our Harrier aircraft into a single potent capability. It has already proved its worth in Sierra Leone. We have created a single logistics organisation under a chief of defence logistics who is charged with streamlining and improving support to the front line. We are sustaining and broadening the success of the smart procurement initiative under what we now call smart acquisition. With smart acquisition, we are reducing the acquisition cost of defence equipment by £2 billion over the next 10-year period from 1998 to 2008, just as we said we should do in the SDR.

I give just one of the many examples of the success of smart acquisition. On the Seawolf surface-to-air missile programme, we aim to produce a common basic missile to re-arm the different systems on type 22 and type 23 frigates. By tightly writing the contract to include incentive payments for early delivery plus profit and risk sharing arrangements, we expect to reduce projected costs by up to 50 per cent.

The SDR is a long-term programme. The last SDR decision will not take effect until the Tornado GR4 is phased out as planned in 2020. Already, however, almost half of the key SDR measures have been implemented, although we have at the same time been engaged in crises in the Gulf, Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone. That is a considerable achievement.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. He referred to the Defence Logistics Organisation. Given that a National Audit Office report found that stocks of laser-guided bombs ran critically low during the Kosovo crisis, that morphine supplies were mismanaged and that tent accommodation was inadequate, will the right hon. Gentleman tell us what targets for improved services have been set for the Defence Logistics Organisation, and within what time scale does he expect those targets to be achieved?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman's question mixes several issues. I stress that we have set in train a significant reform of logistics. I outlined in general terms what that involves—it will bring about a massive shake-up in the supply of logistics. We anticipate that there will be a 20 per cent. saving—that is already on track and is being achieved. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces said that that effort has—rightly—been supported by those on the Opposition Front Bench. That practical reform will save money and deliver equipment more efficiently to our armed forces.

I should like to come now to the question of money and what the outcome of spending review 2000 means for defence. In July, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced the first planned, sustained, real-terms increase in the defence budget since the mid-1980s. The defence budget will rise from about £23 billion this year to almost £25 billion by 2003–04. We will see £1.25 billion of new money for defence—after inflation—in a guaranteed three-year deal.

The spending review 2000 settlement is a hugely significant development. After years of successive cuts in defence spending under the Conservatives, we have announced the first real-terms, year-on-year increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. Such sustained growth in the defence budget represents real investment by this Government in the continued quality and effectiveness of our armed forces.

The Conservative party has so far failed to promise to match such investment. Indeed, we have had no signs of any Opposition spending plans. There has been a great deal

[Mr. Hoon]

of talk from the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), but no commitment to match our investment in Britain's armed forces.

Mr. Duncan Smith *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman is going to say that the Conservatives will match our investment in the armed forces, I will be delighted to give way to him.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I want to correct a couple of small points. The first is that the Secretary of State said that Labour is making the first sustained, real-terms increase. That is not true. In 1997, there was a sustained, real-terms increase. Secondly, he inherited a budget of 2.7 per cent. of gross domestic product. Under the strategic defence review, the Government reduced the budget by £1.4 billion, so it fell to about 2.3 per cent. of GDP. Therefore, the Secretary of State needed the cash injection to stabilise spending following the cut that he originally implemented.

Mr. Hoon: I did not notice the hon. Gentleman make any commitment to sustain the investment. He is playing with statistics. I am talking about real, new money after a long period during which the Government whom he supported and of whom, indeed, several current Conservative Members were part, cut defence spending. I warn the hon. Gentleman that if he is not able to commit the money, he should spend a little less time telling us what we are supposed to do to defend Britain, and more time defending his shadow Budget from his shadow Chancellor when it is made to bear the brunt of Tory spending cuts. The hon. Gentleman would be better off concentrating on the enemies behind him rather than the opponents opposite him.

I should now like to deal with issues relating to NATO, European defence and multinational defence co-operation. Although the Kosovo campaign was entirely successful in meeting all our political and military objectives, we had to rely disproportionately on the Americans for the military might that underpinned it. We cannot and should not always expect to do so for crises on Europe's doorstep. That is why we have been at the forefront of efforts to adapt and modernise Europe's defence capabilities in the same way that we have modernised our own. That was a key part of the discussion at the NATO informal ministerial meeting in Birmingham last month. I should like to report to the House on what came out of that, and on the work that we are doing to build up Europe's responsibilities in the field of security and defence. The subject is frequently misunderstood, and I suspect even occasionally deliberately misrepresented. I therefore welcome this opportunity to put the record straight.

The essential purpose of the changes that we are making to Europe's defence architecture is to strengthen the ability of European nations to act in pursuit of their foreign and security policy objectives. That means two things. First, we want to strengthen Europe's military capabilities, so that we can both make a better and more coherent contribution to NATO and give credibility to European military options in which NATO as a whole is not engaged. Secondly, we want to give the European Union the capacity to take military decisions and to take political control of crisis-management operations.

None of that means weakening NATO. Let me be absolutely clear that we are not building a competitor to NATO. Nor are we prepared to take any action that might damage or undermine the alliance. We are tying future European crisis management firmly to the framework of the NATO alliance. There is no disagreement among allies about that. NATO is and will remain the cornerstone of our security and defence policy. For any realistic large-scale military operation, NATO is the first and only option. NATO will remain the sole organisation for collective defence in Europe, and NATO will be the organisation to which we expect to turn for significant crisis-management operations—certainly when Europeans and north Americans intend to act together.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): What I am about to say will not come as a surprise to the Secretary of State because he has heard it from me before. Will he explain to the House how he can guarantee that a crisis that does not involve the Americans will not escalate out of control in a way that would not have happened if the Americans and NATO had been involved from the beginning? It is that unpredictability that is so dangerous.

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not understand how international crises are handled. If he did, he would know that they are not managed in isolation by any one country or group of countries; there is a close understanding between all allies involved regarding the appropriate response to a crisis. Even if the circumstances he describes were to start to emerge, the Americans would have been closely involved throughout the crisis in determining the appropriate nature of the international community's response.

Mr. Keetch: As one west midlands Member of Parliament to another, may I ask whether the Secretary of State remembers the informal meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in Birmingham on 10 October? When United States Defence Secretary William Cohen said that it is

> right and natural that an increasingly integrated Europe seeks to develop its own security and defence policy with a military capability to back it up

did he not make it clear that the United States has no concerns about the policy that the Government are pursuing?

Mr. Hoon: I shall deal with that point soon. I was a little surprised—as, no doubt, my constituents will be—to discover that we have been removed to the west midlands. However, I realise that the Liberal Democrats are a little loose about geography, as they are about so many issues.

The headline goal agreed by EU member states at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999 is designed to deliver more effective European forces. EU leaders agreed that, by 2003, they should be able to deploy rapidly and then to sustain for at least a year military forces that are capable of undertaking the most demanding crisis management tasks up to corps level—some 60,000 strong. That level of force will be available either as a contribution to a NATO operation or for an EU-led operation.

We have spent some months since Helsinki developing a detailed statement of requirement of the pool of forces and capabilities that it implies—the headline catalogue. Later this month, EU member states will hold a capability commitment conference at which we will publicly set out our contributions to the catalogue. Member states will also make commitments to remedy remaining qualitative and quantitative shortfalls, and to establish a review mechanism to ensure that progress in addressing those shortfalls is monitored. That will give us a programme and a timetable for meeting the headline goal.

All that does not mean a standing reaction force. It certainly does not mean a European army. It requires the identification of a pool of capability from which forces can be assembled on a case-by-case basis for specific operations, followed by the progressive modernisation of European armed forces, so that they are more deployable, more readily available and more sustainable. Everyone—both NATO and Europe—stands to benefit.

The Conservatives are always eager to tell us what the Americans are reported to think about European defence. In their hatred of all things European, they look to the Americans to bail them out, so let me tell the House—yet again—what the Americans really think. Speaking in Birmingham about the headline goal, US Defence Secretary William Cohen said:

> Let me be clear on America's position. We agree with this goal—not grudgingly, not with resignation, but with whole-hearted conviction.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Will the right hon. Gentleman provide an assessment of the Government's attitude to the suggestion that NATO should have a right of first refusal in any circumstances in which European forces might be deployed in the sort of roles that he has described? It strikes me that that could be an important part of ensuring that the United States was never excluded from decision making and it would also deal with those members of NATO that are outside the European Union.

Mr. Hoon: We are working to achieve coherence between NATO planning processes and the emerging EU planning processes. I do not entirely accept that a formal right of first refusal would be appropriate, because of the way in which a crisis can develop internationally. A crisis might begin as a relatively small-scale problem that was initially the responsibility of the EU because NATO had judged that it was more a matter for European nations to deal with than for NATO. Therefore, a formal right of first refusal might not necessarily achieve the policy objective that I assume the right hon. and learned Gentleman wants. However, it might be achieved by ensuring absolute consistency between the planning processes of both NATO and the EU, an absence of duplication between the two, and real consistency in the international community's response. That is precisely what the Government are seeking to achieve and for which we have achieved widespread support, both within NATO and the European Union.

I think that Opposition Members have forgotten about what underlies this policy area. The Americans understand that we are strengthening NATO; we are not weakening it by strengthening the European contribution. For years—arguably for decades—our US allies have been calling for Europe to get its act together. That is precisely what we are doing. In Birmingham, we discussed the change in direction needed by the alliance, from a large, immobile defensive force intended to confront a massive attack on Europe—NATO's primary function for more than 40 years—to one capable of deploying quickly and effectively for crisis management and peace support operations.

We discussed the defence capabilities initiative, the alliance's programme to improve the capability of its forces in key areas such as air-to-air refuelling and strategic air lift. This will enhance the ability of European states to deploy their armed forces as part of coalition operations and ensure greater interoperability with US forces.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): During the NATO discussions at Birmingham, what discussion took place about the United State's proposal for national missile defence? Did most European countries say that they were opposed to such defence and would not co-operate with it? Did the British Government give a private opinion to the US that they would be prepared to co-operate if a request were made?

Mr. Hoon: There was little discussion of national missile defence at Birmingham, not least because by then the United States had indicated its intention of deferring a decision. As I said to my hon. Friend during Defence questions only the other day, the US having decided to defer the decision, it would be purely speculative for him to suggest that the UK had made any commitment in one direction or another. Unless and until a request is received, he is merely speculating.

We strongly support the departmental central index—

Dr. Godman: I am delighted that Europe is getting its security act together—I think that those were my right hon. Friend's words. Can he assure the House that the Governments of Finland, Sweden and the Irish Republic have the same enthusiasm towards the concept of a rapid response force?

Mr. Hoon: I can give that reassurance. Those countries welcome the opportunity that the headline goal affords to participate in the effective forces that that goal presupposes. Smaller countries clearly are not in a position necessarily to have the full range of forces that are available, for example, to the UK Government. However, they can play a significant part in building up those forces. Finland and other Scandinavian countries are planning a Scandinavian brigade, which will contribute to the rapid reaction force that is envisaged in the headline catalogue. That will allow them to play a part which otherwise would not be available to them. Significant opportunities are afforded to the countries that my hon. Friend has mentioned.

We strongly support the DCI. It is modernising NATO in the same way that we have adapted our own forces following the strategic defence review. We will no longer be waiting for a threat that is most unlikely to arrive. Instead, we will have the capability to deploy and to deal with threats as and when they occur.

Our involvement in future operations of any scale in and around Europe will almost inevitably be as part of a coalition. This emphasises the importance of forging closer links with those countries that we may find

[Mr. Hoon]

ourselves operating alongside in a crisis. These are countries within NATO and like-minded countries elsewhere, such as Sweden and Australia. The benefits of that sort of multinational defence co-operation are obvious. We cannot hope to obtain the very best in military equipment and capability by going it alone. Modern defence equipment programmes are very expensive and require a phenomenal technological input.

Eurofighter, for example, will be the world's finest fighter aircraft. It is the result of the combined efforts of four nations. As a result, we will get it at a lower price and with more advanced technology than if we had tried to go it alone. There will be huge operational benefits from four NATO nations using the same aircraft, many of the same weapons and much of the same ground equipment. If the UK went alone down that path, Eurofighter would cost much more and would be much less capable.

There are many other examples of effective multinational equipment co-operation. The Storm Shadow air-launched cruise missile is Anglo-French. New armoured vehicles are being designed and will be produced in collaboration with Germany. We are talking to the Australians about our future strategic tanker requirement. There are exciting projects that will bring the countries of NATO, Europe and our friends and allies further afield closer together.

It is not just in procurement that benefits are to be had from working more closely together; there are real operational advantages, too. The UK-Netherlands amphibious force brings together the excellence of our Royal Marines and the Dutch Marines. They have similar equipment, use the same tactics and deploy from the same sort of ships. They work together in peace, and can deploy together in a crisis.

The allied Rapid Reaction Corps, which the UK heads, distinguished itself in Kosovo. In addition, there is the possible twinning—not joining—of German, Italian and RAF Tornados in the suppression of enemy air defences, utilising the best of each country's capability to improve the end product. The key point about multinational defence co-operation is that it improves operational capability and, where that is the case, we will do more of it.

Over the past 12 months, Britain's armed forces have once again made us proud. They have done everything we have asked of them and more, often in dangerous and difficult circumstances, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, the Gulf and Sierra Leone.

The Government are serious about defence—we are serious about investing in defence; we are serious about looking after the people who provide our defence; and we are serious about ensuring that structures are in place, both in Europe and at home, to deliver the defence that the nation needs. We are doing all of that not with words but with actions, and we are already seeing the benefits. We are not modernising Britain's defence for the sake of it: we are doing it to ensure that Britain's forces, which are the best, remain the best. We are the only party prepared to commit the investment necessary to get the job done.

4.46 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to our armed forces. He is right to be proud of all that they have achieved. I also associate myself and all members of my party with the condolences that he gave to the family of Brad Tinnion and to others who were wounded. Although Brad Tinnion was the only person who, sadly, lost his life, others received wounds in what was a brilliant operation. We have come to expect our armed forces to deliver, but when they do it still sometimes takes our breath away. We are justifiably proud of them, and I therefore associate my party with the right hon. Gentleman's comments about them and their actions.

In future, would it not be a good idea to have these debates on a substantive motion rather than as an Adjournment debate? I understand that that is a little difficult without a White Paper, but perhaps it would be possible to find a mechanism—such as Select Committee reports—by which we can create a substantive motion and thus involve other hon. Members in shaping the debate. That is solely an observation, but I hope that the Secretary of State will relay it to his colleagues who sit further down the Treasury Bench—not that they are officially present at the moment.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the activities in which our armed forces have been involved. I shall follow his lead and quickly refer to them. Forces in Bosnia and Kosovo whom my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) and I visited have operated in extremely difficult circumstances. They have had to spend long periods away from their friends and families, often on tour for six or seven months before going back home for a briefer period than that. They have then had to turn around and go back, if not to the same location, to areas close by. When we were in the region towards the end of last year, soldiers said to my hon. Friend and me that they would like to spend more time with their families and have more opportunity to train. I simply present those comments to the Secretary of State as key objectives—to give service people more time with their families and more time to train lest they lose those skills.

We are justifiably proud of what our forces have done. Recent events in Kosovo and Serbia are testimony to their hard work. We do not know how the situation in Serbia will develop—things still hang in the balance—but our forces can be proud of the part that they have played. The right hon. Gentleman was right to praise them.

The right hon. Gentleman was also right to say that the war in Iraq is in many ways the forgotten war. RAF pilots fly daily sorties. When my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) visited the forces there, he realised that they are almost completely forgotten by our national papers. That is not a criticism, merely an observation. Those pilots risk their lives daily, but we have got used to that idea and forgotten them. On behalf of the Opposition, I pay tribute to what our pilots have been doing. They are doing their duty and doing it excellently, and the Secretary of State is right to draw attention to that. It should no longer be the forgotten war.

The Secretary of State is also right to speak about the importance of the job that our soldiers and other service men carry out in Northern Ireland. It is easy to assume, as many hon. Members may, that there is no longer a need for members of the armed forces to be out in Northern Ireland, and that everything is settled. Only today on the news we heard that there have been both a bomb and a shooting there, which brings us quickly to the conclusion that, whatever else is going on, it is not the case that there is no need for our troops.

The Secretary of State is right to say that he must be cautious when people suggest that we should withdraw more troops from Northern Ireland. I urge him to be cautious about the numbers that he withdraws, and to be certain that he will not have to send them back in two or three months' time, in a slightly more unprepared state.

I spoke earlier today about the possibility of setting up a memorial to those who lost their lives in the service of the Crown as a result of the troubles in Northern Ireland. I thank the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister for welcoming the suggestion and speaking about seeing it through. I hope that something can be done. The House owes a debt of gratitude to a special group of people—not just the service men and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, but many others, and not just in Northern Ireland—who, as a result of the troubles, made the ultimate sacrifice. It would be good for us to have a place to go and say thank you, rather than remembering just wars and major campaigns.

The Secretary of State spoke about Sierra Leone. He knows that in the earlier operations we supported the Government in their objectives, but I remain concerned about the way in which matters are developing and about the conditions out there. The Secretary of State referred in the House on Monday to extra force deployments—temporary, as he pointed out today—about which I want to ask him some questions, so that we can judge whether there is a threat of our being sucked into Sierra Leone without any clear objective.

Perhaps the Secretary of State, or the Minister for the Armed Forces when he winds up, could explain what conditions will have to prevail in Sierra Leone before British troops are withdrawn—I know that time scales are difficult—and what lies behind the appointment of the brigadier who has gone as chief of staff to the United Nations commander. To what extent is that a change in policy with regard to our connection and involvement with the UN? Does it portend that there is a possibility that we will end up joining the UN force, or is that ruled out? I share the reservations and deep concern of the Ministry of Defence about Britain becoming a full member of the UN force, as that would restrict our options. I understand that the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, does not share that view, but the House would be grateful if the Minister explained the Government's thinking.

What will be the role of the task force? Once it goes out to Sierra Leone, it will carry out what the Secretary of State called an exercise or demonstration. If that is the purpose, how long is it anticipated that the force will be there, and what will happen to it once the exercise is finished? Will it be withdrawn, left there or moved somewhere else so that it can react speedily? Perhaps the Minister can answer that now or when he winds up.

The Secretary of State spoke about the international training team and our long-term commitment to it. Earlier in the year, when we visited the British training force, it was clear to me—and I expect to others—that our team would be there for only a brief period, and that the international training team would slowly start to take over in the autumn, so there would be no need for a separate British training team.

Perhaps the Minister could explain what has happened to the time scale for the international training team. Does he claim that there will not be enough people to carry out the training—we were assured that there would be enough people—or is it simply a case of not being able to rustle up the people to do the job? We have received no explanation.

I understood that the most of the British forces who were training would be withdrawn after providing a short sharp start to the training process, but the plan has been extended to next year. What commitments have been made beyond that? If there are such commitments, why have they been made? What has happened to the international training team? My hon. Friends and I would be grateful for some explanation of what is happening in Sierra Leone, and I hope that the Minister, who will wind up and possibly open the second half of the debate tomorrow, will provide it.

We have already taken up a reasonable amount of time, and the Secretary of State gave way on a wide range of subjects. I shall not refer to every subject that the right hon. Gentleman covered because there will be time tomorrow to deal with many of those topics. The Minister will probably mention some of them. I shall concentrate on the European security and defence identity and the development of the European defence programme.

In the next two to three weeks, with the approaching force generation conference, it would be reasonable to try to ascertain the way in which we have arrived at our current position and its implications not only for Europe but for the United States and others. One tends to forget the Canadians, who are very much a part of the process.

For me, it is not a matter of debate that the nations of Europe should be able to do more, have a greater capability, and be more efficient in military terms. As partners in NATO, they owe it to their big partner, the United States. They also owe it to themselves because, for too long, they have assumed that someone else will act for them.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): Does the shadow Secretary of State acknowledge that the comments that he and Baroness Thatcher made in Washington DC did nothing to reflect the views that he has just enunciated, and that they caused untold consternation among Congressmen and Senators on the Hill? If he had consulted people such as Congressman Biereuter from Nebraska or the late Herb Bateman, he would have learned a little more about the position than he conveyed to their colleagues. Does he accept that he caused much of the trouble that has been settled by the quotation that the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) cited earlier?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I am pleased to know that people I meet on visits even listen to my words, let alone act on them. It gives me great pleasure to hear that my words had an effect in Washington; I meant them to have an effect. I am sure that the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) was sincere in his comments. However, I made it clear at the beginning of my remarks in Washington, as I have done today, that capability is critical, but that the method of achieving it is also critical. The key to that is not breaking the alliance. I shall go through that later. However, I did not say anything to the contrary. I pointed out in the evidence that I gave in Washington that I believe that we are engaged in an exercise that will lead to the worst, not the best results. I shall deal with the reasons for that later.

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

I have no responsibility for what Lady Thatcher says. If the hon. Member for Stockton, North wants to make some comments to her, he is more than welcome to do so, but I shall not follow him down that road; it is not something that I would necessarily do with ease.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): She would hit him on the head with a handbag.

Mr. Duncan Smith: If the Minister would like to claim responsibility for the comments of his predecessors who happened to be Prime Minister, he is welcome to do it. If he wants to claim responsibility for Lady Thatcher's, that is fine. I agree with much of what Lady Thatcher says, but I do not claim that she owes me any apologies or foreknowledge of her remarks. What she says is rightly her business, and we agree with that with which we agree. I am speaking for the Opposition, who will be in government next year. *[Interruption.]* I cannot keep a straight face because the way in which the Government smile about their demise always gives me great pleasure.

Under the Conservative Government, the European security and defence identity was being developed within NATO, not in competition with it. The Western European Union was being developed as the forum for the expression of European defence interests within NATO, and was formally recognised as such at that time by the European Union. That policy was clearly inherited by the Labour Government when they took power.

In Amsterdam in June 1997, the Prime Minister's spin doctors proudly trumpeted the fact that he had won the "battle" against moves to merge the WEU and the EU. In fact—this is most interesting—when the Prime Minister came back from Amsterdam, he said—*[Interruption.]* I should like the Secretary of State to listen to this. He may wish to know what the Prime Minister actually said. He said:

> getting Europe's voice heard more clearly in the world will not be achieved through merging the European Union and the Western European Union or developing an unrealistic common defence policy.—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 314.]

I thought that, after Amsterdam, the Prime Minister, at least, was clear. He went on to say that Europe's defence should remain a matter for NATO, not the EU. He described plans for a merger between the WEU and the EU, which now appear to be under way, as

> like an ill-judged transplant operation.

The Guardian—which is always close to Labour, although it sometimes does not like to say so—reported at the time:

> Mr. Blair feared it would undermine US commitment to Europe.

Whatever else the Secretary of State thinks the Prime Minister said, I think it is clear from the record what he thought of the proposals. When he was questioned after Amsterdam, I asked him whether he agreed that because he had conceded the principle that defence was in the treaty, others would have an opportunity to build a common defence. He replied:

> No . . . We are under no obligation . . . to merge the EU and WEU.—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 322.]

Suppose that someone who has been locked away in a Big Brother-style house for the past three and a half years—like many Labour Back Benchers—is suddenly voted out, as I hope Labour will be next year. It would be fair for that person to assume—given the Prime Minister's strong language after Amsterdam—that the Government's policy had continued along those lines. That is straightforward; it would seem reasonable. But this is the Prime Minister who wrote in *The Sun*, before the last election, of his great love for the pound, and his strong belief that it was superb. He seems to have fallen out of love with it in double-quick time, so perhaps the person from the Big Brother house would be expecting too much. But he—this character who has been locked away in Big Brother's room—would find that there was a full-blown proposal for an EU force of some 60,000 men on deployment, with a pool back-up of some 200,000 men nominated to sustain it. He would see a raft of EU-based military structures, and a high representative for defence based in Brussels. He would note with some surprise, given the "transplant" comments, that the WEU was to be merged with the EU. He would hear proposals for joint European intelligence facilities. He would read about Mr. Prodi and other politicians who now talk boldly about the creation of a European army.

As the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife said earlier, what that person would not see is any way in which NATO would have a right of refusal, because the Government have handed power to block the decision to the French, who have duly done so. He would see all those aspects of the process being dealt with outside NATO—separated from the NATO alliance. Most surprising of all, however, would be the discovery that all this had been initiated and led by the Prime Minister—the very man who had described such potential developments as an ill-judged transplant operation which he had rejected.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, as he is dwelling on matters of historical record. He and I arrived in the House at about the same time and spent many of our early months here debating European matters. Does he recall that, throughout that period, he was a consistent rebel, opposing the then Conservative Government's policy on Europe? Is it a change in his party's policy on Europe that allows him to sit on the Opposition Front Bench, representing the senior reaches of the Conservative party, or has he changed his views on opposing the European Union?

Mr. Duncan Smith: What a remarkably difficult question. The Conservative party is following common-sense policies on Europe. My party is clear and open about the fact that this Government were elected on the basis of one set of beliefs but immediately changed it for another set. That is exactly what the Prime Minister has done, as evidenced by what I have quoted. Although the Secretary of State has strong beliefs on such matters, he did not write any articles saying how much he loved the pound—clearly, he does not. However, the Prime Minister spent his time doing so and telling us that these arrangements would not work, yet he has now not only agreed to them, but charged and lead the damn things. The Prime Minister is clear and honest in that he never seems to hold an opinion for a day longer than he has to.

Why has all this happened? There is no question but that a U-turn has taken place, but at least it has done so rhetorically. Why did the Prime Minister do it? Did he no longer believe in what he was saying in 1997? Had he

seen the light? Or did he believe that he had pulled the wool over the British public's eyes for long enough to get away with it? Perhaps it is more relevant that he felt that he was being sidelined in Europe just as the EU was about to embark on the single currency and he needed to find some powerful friends to ensure that he was not left out in the cold, and defence was the big-ticket item that he could use in the corridors of power.

At St. Malo, the Prime Minister clearly laid the foundations for the change in policy. The agreement sealed the initiative that the EU will need recourse to

> multinational military means inside or outside the NATO framework.

It stated:

> The Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed by credible military forces . . .

and

> the EU will need to have recourse to suitable military means . . .

During NATO's 50th anniversary, the French saw a door that opened on to their concerns and dislike of what NATO had previously represented. They saw a chance to change the defence posture of Europe and the British. But even the French were taken aback by the speed of the process that the Prime Minister had initiated. On 20 January 2000, Pierre Moscovici, the French Minister for European Affairs, told *L'Express*:

> Europe is forging ahead—faster and further than people realise.

The Washington conference, which is often claimed to show what America believes about the process, could have dealt with such matters, but it did not. It became a case of smoke and mirrors—a way in which to deceive the participants into believing that there was nothing to worry about. Undertakings were given but never met. Obligations were talked about but not proceeded with. The debate on European defence was washed over and postponed because of the Kosovo crisis, which occurred in the midst of that conference. The cracks that were appearing had to be papered over for the sake of alliance unity and, therefore, a form of words was agreed that many in Europe thought would keep the Americans sweet. European Governments made it their clear project to manoeuvre around the potential road block represented by the Washington conference and to be careful to keep sight of what was now their clear objective.

Since then, the Government have spun the myth that their new policy was endorsed at Washington in 1999. However, what was endorsed at Washington is not what we have today. The concept conceived at Washington imitated a combined joint task force approach using NATO command structures, operating within NATO, and open to all NATO members, including the United States. The alliance reiterated its readiness to

> make collective assets available . . . Develop separable but not separate multinational capabilities, assets and support assets; separable but not separate HQs . . .

That was the dream at Washington, but it has remained only that. In reality, Washington plays no part at all in the new policy.

Under the ESDP, we have developed, or are developing, many separate multinational capabilities outside the alliance. We see the setting up of separate capabilities for intelligence gathering, heavy lift by sea and air, logistics support and communications. Under the same policy, we have developed separate independent headquarters with separate European command arrangements, all outside NATO.

Mr. Brazier: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way in the middle of the compelling case that he is making. Perhaps a significant item to add to his list is an extraordinary piece of geography: Mr. Solana is located in the EU building, not the NATO building, in the city of Brussels. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Duncan Smith: All I can say, echoing the words from a sedentary position of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife, who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, is that that is exactly where Mr. Solana is meant to be. Hon. Members guffaw, but my hon. Friend is right. That is exactly the point. That is where Mr. Solana's responsibility and reporting lines are. He is there to report back to the EU, so my hon. Friend is right to make the point. There is no involvement for Mr. Solana with NATO.

Let me come to the last point about the Washington summit, which is vital. As I have said, it warned against the development of a programme that was not "open to all members". Non-EU NATO members such as Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Norway and even Denmark—which, the Secretary of State may remember, opted out of the process at Maastricht—have been left out, while the EU embraces neutral states into the process.

The point was made earlier. Many of those nations, if not all of them—certainly Turkey—are very angry because, having been willing and strong participants in NATO, and believing themselves for the most part to be nations in Europe, they find themselves—for no other reason than that they are out of the EU—excluded from a process that is supposed to be part of NATO. They are outside. We have some inside that have never shown capability within NATO, and forces and structures separate from NATO are being developed.

The train was kick-started at St. Malo. It has gone on, detouring at Washington, and stopping at Cologne and Helsinki. If where we now say we are is not where the Prime Minister wanted us to be originally—he changed his mind—what was the purpose of the exercise in the first place? The Government always say that this was simply about delivering the Petersberg tasks more efficiently, but the more we look at the structure and capability under the process, and at the separateness of it, the more clear it becomes that the forces under the headline goal of the ESDP are not just intended for the Petersberg tasks, which after all fall for the most part at the low-intensity end of the conflict spectrum.

Originally, the so-called Petersberg tasks were defined as being within NATO and WEU led. The prime example of that was operation Alba in Albania, where some 7,000 European troops were mobilised.

Interestingly, the previous Government's view of Petersberg was made clear by my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton), then Minister of State for the Armed Forces who said in a written answer:

> The development of WEU as a means to strengthen the European pillar of the Atlantic alliance will be based on the principle of complementarity between the facilities and activities of NATO and WEU, so duplication should be avoided.

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

He went on:

WEU would have no permanent forces or headquarters ultimately of its own.—[*Official Report*, 17 May 1993; Vol. 225, c. 80-81W.]

It was the intention of the previous Government that that should act as a structure to deliver Petersberg, but that is not now the case.

Let us look at what the French have been saying about the Petersberg tasks. The French Defence Minister, Alain Richard, speaking to the General Affairs Council on 15 November, said:

We could increase the strength of deployable forces. The land component should allow us to deal with two simultaneous crises, including the high intensity one with a long term requirement for forces. The ability at sea and air lift components to project forces and carry out deep strikes would be significantly increased. Here we could envisage supplementing by 6 to 7 brigades and 600 to 700 aircraft including 400 to 450 combat aircraft.

All that envisaged to deliver peacekeeping tasks under Petersberg? It beggars belief.

In May, the Secretary of State helpfully explained the Government's position:

at the Helsinki European Council last December, all EU leaders committed themselves to meeting a challenging target for collective capability.

As usual, the Secretary of State's seemingly level-headed rhetoric is not matched by the views and opinions of politicians across the channel, even discounting the usual talk about Mr. Prodi. I shall not go into the usual quotes about Mr. Prodi's calls.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Go on.

Mr. Duncan Smith: No, I shall not do that, as we have all heard enough about Mr. Prodi's calls to know what they are. However, it is worth having a look at a few other people in France in relation to defence policy. The French Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, talked about taking

a decisive step towards building a political Europe.

The French European Affairs Minister, Pierre Moscovici, said of defence policy:

We don't agree with the Americanization of the world . . . We are saying that together we can build a new superpower . . . and its name will be Europe.

President Chirac said:

developing a European Union foreign defence policy is a fundamentally political project . . . if it does not happen, the very life force of our continent will ebb away.

In case right hon. and hon. Members thought that such super-power dreaming was confined to the French, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, said in a speech to the Bundestag on 10 December that the development of the European security and defence identity was

another pillar in the process of European unification.

Such views are held not just in Germany and France but a little closer to home. The Prime Minister started to use the same language when he went to Warsaw, and talked about the creation of a European super-power. Locking together the comments that I quoted, one is struck by the fact that there are ambitions that the Government never seem to admit. As I shall explain shortly, the dangers are far too grave to be laughed at.

Dr. Julian Lewis: In fairness to the Prime Minister, he said that he wanted to create a European super-power, not a European superstate. Can my hon. Friend or, indeed, anyone else, throw any light whatever on the difference and distinction between the two?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I find it difficult to throw any light on the what the Prime Minister says at any time. The example that I gave was a classic case of the Prime Minister saying two things that run counter to one another and pretending different things to whatever audience he is addressing. He spun the super-power message to the audience in Europe which, he thought, wanted to hear that. However, to the audience back home, such as *The Sun*, he spun the message about not being a superstate.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): If the hon. Gentleman will excuse me, I thought that our debate was supposed to be about the defence of Britain, not attacking Europe.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman's intervention spoke for itself. Indeed, that was all that it did.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend think it significant that the former Irish Prime Minister John Bruton, when reflecting on his experiences in government, recently observed that member states will not be able to dine à la carte any more? He said that Europe needs to develop effective political institutions, which demands sacrifices of Europe's peoples and mobilising them in a common cause. Could that be any clearer?

Mr. Duncan Smith: Absolutely not. I hope that the quotations that I have used say something similar about defence.

I am trying to point out that grandiose ambitions have no part in strengthening NATO and are more about creating a European view that is against of our other allies. I am not in favour of that, as it would be bad for the rest of the world.

The Secretary of State discussed America's attitude to ESDI. He and his colleagues are always saying that that is all right, although I agree with the hon. Member for Stockton, North that the Government are not all of that opinion. I shall deal with what the Secretary of State said. Last year, the Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbot, warned against what should not happen. He said:

We would not want to see an ESDI that comes into being first within NATO but then grows out of NATO and finally grows away from NATO, since that would lead to an ESDI that initially duplicates NATO but that could eventually compete with NATO

Straining every spinning sinew, however, the Government try to re-interpret every United States comment on the issue. On 11 October, *The Times* somehow reported that William Cohen's speech in Birmingham, to which the Secretary of State referred, demonstrated a

sharp break with America's previous tepid support

for European security and defence policy.

At a subsequent press conference, however, having read and denied such reports, Mr. Cohen went on to say:

I know that some have interpreted my prepared statement as somehow being divergent from the US position. It is not . . . What we don't want to see is a separate planning bureaucracy established that is independent and separate from that of NATO itself.

As I explained earlier, however, that is what we are progressively getting.

It is small wonder that Mr. Cohen has previously voiced concerns. On 6 February, in Munich, he said:

> My fear is that we will see European nations construct a new bureaucracy.

Mr. Hoon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I shall in a minute.

Mr. Cohen added that, if the EU members of the alliance kept cutting their defence spending, they would undermine the alliance instead of building a stronger European defence pillar. I agree with the Secretary of State that it is absolutely clear that the United States wants an improved capability. However, it is clear also that an improved capability is not the primary objective of most of those who are involved in the process. Indeed, it is very low on their list of objectives.

Mr. Hoon: When the United States Defence Secretary was saying that his policy was not in any way diverging from what had gone before, he was making it clear that what had gone before was consistent United States Administration support for the policy of the headline goal. The hon. Gentleman tended to give the House the impression that that might not be the case, but I am sure that he will want to take this opportunity to correct that impression.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Mr. Cohen has made himself absolutely clear: he wants improved NATO capabilities. I agree with that objective. He is also saying, however, that that is not likely to happen. I am simply saying that I do not believe that it is happening. New structures are being developed beyond NATO which, ultimately, will weaken NATO. We cannot build a new building and maintain the old one while taking bricks from it, but that is what is now happening.

Far from our creating improvements in capabilities, defence spending in key European countries is decreasing very quickly. According to *Die Welt* of 13 October, the lack of defence spending in Germany has resulted in the restructured Bundeswehr being

> neither completely alliance-capable nor Europe-capable.

This year, the International Institute for Strategic Studies has again found that, in most west European countries, military spending remains in decline. In 1999, defence spending in European NATO countries decreased in real terms by 5 per cent. Despite all the Secretary of State's statements and talk of capability, across Europe, budgets for 2000 indicate a further 6 per cent. decrease.

I should like to deal with a rather important development which, if not threatening, certainly creates the type of environment in which United States detachment and NATO debilitation are facilitated. While the Americans have given only a conditional acknowledgement of ESDP, the Russians have wholeheartedly welcomed it. On Tuesday, the *Financial Times* reported that Russia and the European Union have

> agreed Russia could be involved in future EU-led crisis management operations.

The Russians have welcomed the initiative since way back, at St. Malo, and have made it absolutely clear that the initiative would be best if—as they hoped and believed it would—it progressively decoupled the United States from Europe. The *Financial Times* article seems to show that the general trend in both Paris and Moscow is to welcome the EU's military plans as a step towards creating a counterbalance to American hegemony and NATO-centrism.

Mr. Cash: My hon. Friend may not wish to follow me down this route, but he will of course recall that Javier Solana campaigned against NATO for seven years—although he now has the top slot in the European dimension in dealing with the matter—*[Interruption.]* It is all very well for the Secretary of State to laugh, but he knows that that is true.

Mr. Hoon: It is wrong.

Mr. Cash: As a Minister in Spain, Mr. Solana campaigned against NATO for seven years—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. May I urge the hon. Gentleman not to have a debate with the Secretary of State but to come to the point of his intervention?

Mr. Cash: Would my hon. Friend concur that the extremely important article by Robert Fox in *The Sunday Telegraph* last weekend identified the deep concerns that Washington and the Pentagon now have about this matter? In the article, a Foreign Office official was quoted as saying:

> I think the Prime Minister has really dropped the ball on this. If we sign up at Nice to what the French seem to be wanting, there could be no going back.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, whose attempted exchange with the Secretary of State was most interesting. The Secretary of State seems not to know anything at all about history or about the past of people who are meant to be his political colleagues in Europe. It is a matter of fact that Monsieur Solana—*[Interruption.]* Mr. Solana—*[Interruption.]* Senor Solana—*[Interruption.]* I am getting it right. I know who he is and where he came from, which is a great deal more than the Secretary of State knows. I suspect I also know what Mr. Solana is doing, which is more than the Secretary of State does. Mr. Solana's background is beyond question. The Secretary of State should do a little reading before he talks; it might help him to debate.

In conclusion, I want to say why I think the process is so dangerous. There has been a misunderstanding of the alliance's need for development and force projection. Paragraph 206 of the excellent Kosovo report from the Select Committee makes it clear:

> If NATO is to meet the challenges of future crises—particularly in response to asymmetric threats—it must improve its performance in a number of planning aspects. First, it must streamline its own crisis management planning system.

The report went on to talk in detail about how NATO must improve and restructure itself and learn the lessons to which the Committee referred. I agree and I look forward to a proper debate on that matter. However, that debate must take place now.

We are seeing a diversion from a concentration on making NATO even better and learning the lessons. We are seeing a progressive sliding away of capabilities and

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

other matters that should apply to NATO but which now will apply elsewhere. If the European nations will not spend the sort of money about which the Americans and NATO have been talking for many years, where will the 200,000 men to be nominated for the new European defence force come from? They will simply come from what would have been available on call for NATO. It is not a new force; it is leaching away capability and forces that would have been there before.

It is assumed automatically that there will be a time when the whole of the EU will enjoy a foreign policy agreement that will allow it to deploy force; force that is not agreed with or involving the Americans and is not of any interest to those Europeans who are members of NATO but not members of the EU. There is an assumption that there will be some clear-cut position that will construct walls between our allies within NATO, so that we do not sort out problems and develop projects with them, but do so in isolation. Ultimately, it is about a new sort of new Berlin wall between those who have been reliable and successful allies within NATO.

The most alarming part of the process is that after the 50 or so years of success of NATO, a British Prime Minister should be leading the process. None of the real lessons from that history has been learned, and all the most dangerous aspects are being applied. The Government's European policy is set to drive us away from the US, which would necessarily be bad for them and for us, affecting the cornerstone for security not just in Europe but globally. The policy is also about the setting up of artificial barriers and a smokescreen, behind which far too many European members of NATO will find an excuse to simply lessen their capabilities and get the Americans off their backs. That is why the Government's actions will not increase or improve capability but are more likely to give an excuse to lessen it.

Evidence of that has already been seen in the Government's position, along with that of the French and German Governments, on ballistic missile defence. That is the most critical issue currently testing NATO and the Government's historical role in binding together the alliance on both sides of the Atlantic and keeping it coherent. Here is a clear, growing threat, and I believe that the Ministry of Defence has told the Secretary of State that it is a reality. I think that it believes that over a period of between five and 10 years, such threats, whether made by terrorists or involving ballistic missiles– which are growing in capability—will be delivered. Only the other day, the Iranians tested a missile that was just short of 1,000 miles in capability, yet that has been consistently dismissed by the Government, in the body of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. These developments are taking place.

The Government have failed to give any lead in Europe for a debate to get together the Americans and the rest of the European allies to discuss how NATO can deal with this growing threat. Instead, there are slanging matches in some of the capitals of Europe, and the Government are sitting on the fence, quietly hoping that the whole thing will go away. It will not.

We are talking about an abrogation of responsibility. The British Government's traditional role is to make sure that we do not allow matters such as these to divide or split the alliance. On two clear counts, the test on the ballistic missile issue will do that because the Government have seen fit to hide behind their other allies on continental Europe.

In conclusion, the Government's policy, which rests so heavily on the European agenda, will not only divide NATO but damage the peace, potential and future for the rest of the world in a way which, if they had any honesty or sense of shame, they will come to regret.

5.32 pm

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): I wish to show no disrespect to you or to the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I had hoped to be able to open with a brief reference to Mr. Speaker. So as to keep things in order, might I beg a favour from you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and ask you to convey my remarks to Mr. Speaker? This is my first speech in the parent Chamber since the summer recess, and I wanted to register formally my congratulations and good wishes to Mr. Speaker, particularly in the week that his canonised predecessor has been appointed by the Roman Curia as the patron saint of politicians. In doing that, I suppose I should invoke support and help from that sanctified gentleman for the speech that I am about to make.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that Mr. Speaker would love to receive a letter.

Mr. Cook: In that case, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will have to learn to write.

I begin with an apology for being unable to attend tomorrow's debate because I am required to participate in Brussels in the joint monitoring group of the permanent joint council of NATO. I am sorry about that.

I agree with the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) on a couple of points—no more than a couple. First, I agree that we should change the nature of these debates. I have complained about this before. Each year we have these two-day defence debates, which are rather like a bran tub containing a host of issues that we can pick and mix, dip into and throw out. There is no real main theme. The hon. Gentleman has chosen for his two main themes the two hot potatoes of the day. He is right to do so. The first hot potato is ESDP, and the second is national missile defence. I would dearly love there to be proper debates, with specific motions, on those issues.

For a start, a debate on ESDP would enable the demolition of some of the misrepresentative and distorting statements that have been made today. Moreover, my experience a fortnight ago at the space command centre in Colorado Springs indicates that national missile defence can only become an even hotter potato than it is already, as the intention is to replace the static array at Fylingdales with an X-band radar station.

My constituents live near enough to Fylingdales to be worried about that, especially given the strategic approach known as decapitation. The mission statement says that the X-band radar is supposed to protect the 50 states of America, so a serious attack on the United States would take out its defence systems first. Fylingdales would therefore be hit, as would Thule air base in Greenland and Shemya island in the Pacific.

The better informed we become on this matter, the more sensible will be our ultimate decision. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green was right to

say that the alliance will be put to a real test, but I think that ESDP is being developed properly, as the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) will confirm. I should like the hon. Gentleman to come to Berlin in a fortnight's time—.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I will.

Mr. Cook: Good. The hon. Gentleman will then be able to listen to the debate on these matters in the NATO parliamentary assembly. The picture presented there will be entirely different from that offered to the House this afternoon.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): My knowledge of the NATO parliamentary assembly leads me to fear that the hon. Gentleman is giving an incorrect impression. There is considerable criticism and unease about the extent to which the European security and defence identity might interfere with the close relationship that we have always enjoyed with the United States through the NATO alliance.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful for that observation, with which I agree entirely. My point was not that there was no unease in the assembly, but that the views represented there would paint a picture that is totally different from that presented this afternoon. There is a positive quest in the assembly to resolve problems that have been depicted today as set in stone. That depiction is not true.

I want to return to my bran tub analogy, as I did not expect to get on this hobby-horse quite so early in my speech. I want to raise a number of issues that I would normally have raised in the Select Committee on Defence. As I am no longer a member of that Committee, I cannot do so, but I am obliged to fulfil promises that I have made to my constituents.

The first point has to do with the Fellowship of the Services, an organisation that meets routinely and regularly in my constituency. Its members travel many miles to meetings, at which attendance averages between 55 and 60. That organisation has made clear to me its resentment that the royal tournament, the Edinburgh tattoo and similar events have come under threat.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is listening intently, for which I am grateful, and I hope that he will consider the matter again. The members of the organisation are fiercely and passionately loyal. They take great pride in their record of service to the Crown, but feel that the regard in which they are held is being diminished. I know that that cannot be true, but I hope that my right hon. Friend will be able to say something to reinforce their confidence.

The second issue, that of the Gurkhas, is one that has been raised by several right hon. and hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Wealden, and it is one that is causing consternation among ex-service men in my constituency and throughout the north-east. I understand that resolution of the problem will probably mean challenging some European employment law. Many people feel strongly that the Gurkhas, who have offered themselves in every era of hostility that the British Army has passed through in heaven knows how long, should be able to come here and work as drivers on a temporary basis. There is a double irony in the fact that while the British Army is training drivers for the purposes of fuel delivery contingency plans, we are refusing to allow former members of the British Army—that is what they were—to come here and do a similar job. I ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to reconsider whether it is possible to resolve any possible problem between the ability of the Gurkhas to come here on a temporary basis and European employment law.

The third issue that I have undertaken to raise, on which other hon. Members agree with me, is an old chestnut of mine—the British Nuclear Tests Veterans Association. Victims of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease are being given a sympathetic ear. We have heard today the Prime Minister give a very sure indication that sympathetic consideration will be given to ex-prisoners of war held by the Japanese.

Dr. Godman: So they should.

Mr. Cook: Indeed. After a long-fought battle, there has been a decent response to victims of Gulf war syndrome. The people who are not getting any sympathy other than a pat on the head and have not received even an apology are those members of the armed forces, both men and women, who were deliberately exposed to radiation at Christmas island, Montebello, Maralinga and Easter island. Some were required in various forms of garb to roll in the dust on the ground at ground-zero after the explosions had occurred. They did that because they had been asked to volunteer. It is always a dangerous game to volunteer in the forces—or in here for that matter. They did so readily and willingly and as such they deserve the same treatment that New Zealanders, Americans and Australians are receiving from their Governments for performing the same tasks. I appeal yet again most urgently to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to take the matter on board, to think about it and to admit that he is thinking about it.

The penultimate issue is another passionate interest of mine. It relates to unexploded ordnance. The House will know that I am the founding chairman of the parliamentary all-party group on land mine eradication. I commend the Government for the work that they have undertaken and the initiatives that they have launched. They are providing an example for many other nations to follow. However, cluster bomblets are not classified as anti-personnel mines. They are a much more insidious threat. As one person explained to me, an anti-personnel mine will rip off a person's arm or leg whereas a cluster bomblet will blow him into several pieces because it is so much more powerful. There are literally millions of those around the world. In Xieng Khouang in Laos, I picked up eight of them in an hour and 10 minutes—only realising afterwards what a fool I had been. However, I felt compelled to do it. A school playground that had been sterilised by them for well over 30 years was needed for the following weekend, so I decided to engage in the clearance—simply relocating the mines so that the Mines Action Group could deal with them. It was pretty stupid of me to do that, but I do not regret it.

I have heard the briefings given at NATO headquarters on its attitude on cluster bomblets. What are my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's views on our approach to those weapons—on their definition and use and on clearing up the areas where they are a major source of contamination?

[Mr. Cook]

I conclude by making several points on arms control that are in keeping with the general attitude of Her Majesty's Government towards the proliferation of small arms.

Four years after the publication of the Scott report, legislation has not been passed on its recommendations. Indications suggest that the Government will not introduce such legislation in next month's Queen's Speech. Current legislation was introduced as an emergency measure in 1939 at the start of the second world war. Despite publishing a White Paper in 1998, the Government have yet to introduce legislation to close the many loopholes in the current outdated and inadequate regime. As a result, they are still not equipped with the formal tools to guarantee that UK arms transfers do not contribute to human rights violations or fuel conflict or to the undermining of development.

We need to control arms brokering—whereby UK suppliers deliver weapons sourced outside the UK and which is carried out through the registration and licensing of deals. At present, there are virtually no controls as long as the goods do not touch UK soil. Even current proposals to ban the brokering of torture equipment and to ban brokering to countries subject to arms embargoes do not go far enough. Evidence suggests that UK-based arms brokers already evade embargoes by supplying arms to such destinations via recipients in neighbouring countries.

On 10 September, *The Observer* stated:

> One Birmingham-based company, HPP, last week offered to help arrange delivery of leg irons and CS gas to a private security company in Rwanda, where ethnic tension between Hutu and Tutsi tribes is still simmering after up to a million people died in the 1994 genocide.

In addition, there are several countries—such as Colombia—which are not the subject of an embargo, but to which unregulated arms brokering would clearly fuel armed conflict and existing human rights violations.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry stated:

> In this country you need a licence to marry, to go fishing, to drive a car—you even need a licence to run a raffle. Yet you don't need a licence to broker and traffic in arms. This cannot be right.

I agree with him. He announced that the Government will close that loophole, and I am pleased about that, but he did not say when. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence answer that question?

We need to establish strict controls on licensed production—whereby a UK company allows its products to be manufactured and sold by an overseas company. That permits further evasions. In December 1999, a Channel 4 "Dispatches" programme revealed that a Turkish company had made Heckler and Koch UK submachine guns under licence. I have no objection to that, but I do object to the fact that it then sold 500 of them to the Indonesian police at the height of the East Timor crisis. That is what is wrong.

We need to examine end-use monitoring. Currently, no formal mechanisms exist for monitoring the use of British defence equipment once it has been exported. On 25 July 1999, the chief of the Indonesian armed forces admitted that a British-made Hawk jet flew over Dili, despite earlier assurances to the Government that Hawk jets would not be used in East Timor. Despite that clear breach of end-use assurances, the supply of jets and components has continued. Is that right? Can it go on?

We need tough new legislation. A Gallup poll at the start of the year showed that 87 per cent. of the British public believe that the Government should introduce tighter controls on United Kingdom arms sales as soon as possible—ideally, in the forthcoming Queen's Speech. Failing that, there should be a manifesto commitment to legislate early in the new Parliament. Ironically, at the last arms fair in this country, the Romanians were trying to sell anti-personnel mines. We need much tougher legislation on the control of arms sales in this country.

To control arms brokering, a central database of UK arms brokers should be established and all arms supplies arranged by UK brokers should be subject to the licensed approval of the Government. That is what we have a Government for. We should bring licensed production under the UK arms general export controls. All licensed production should be treated as standard physical arms transfers. The licence determination procedure must be as rigorous as for standard exports. We accidentally discovered the Iranian gun barrels in Cleveland only because they were described as pipework and therefore aroused suspicion.

It is essential to introduce a robust system of monitoring to the end-use of UK arms exports. Suppliers should be responsible for obtaining the verification of delivery from the named end-user and submitting that, within a given time, to the Department of Trade and Industry. All contracts and end-use certificates should require customers never to use their goods for human rights abuses. I know that this sounds like pie in the sky, but we must make efforts to achieve that, and where assurances are broken, contracts should be rendered null and void and further deliveries and repair services cancelled.

The Government also need to promote greater democratic control via a more robust parliamentary scrutiny of arms export licences. They need to adopt a presumption against licensing military equipment for export to countries where they might be used to abuse human rights, fuel conflicts or undermine development. The Government need to seek agreement, within the European Union and internationally, on common controls.

In the light of the great public concern that I detect on these issues, I just hope that the Government will take time to give serious consideration to the possible inclusion of some corrective measures in the forthcoming Queen's Speech.

5.53 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Perhaps I might begin with an apology to the House. I have a long-standing engagement later this evening and therefore cannot be present for the winding-up speeches, but I have written to the shadow Secretary of State and to the Secretary of State to apologise and I will of course be present throughout tomorrow's debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) will seek, if he is fortunate enough, to catch the eye of the Speaker tomorrow to focus on some welfare and armed forces issues and also on procurement matters, so I leave those matters in his entirely capable hands.

I associate myself with the expressions of support that have been given to the armed forces on behalf of the Government and the official Opposition, and with the

expressions of condolence that have been directed towards the friends and relations of Brad Tinnion and others who suffered injury in the course of the very successful operation in Sierra Leone, which has been mentioned.

I give a qualified welcome to the announcement by the Secretary of State that we will at least have one hunter-killer submarine operational. What a gross embarrassment it would have been for the United Kingdom if we had been forced to withdraw all our hunter-killer submarines just a few months ago, at the time of the Kosovo operations—not least because one of them was engaged in firing Tomahawk cruise missiles, which, as we now learn, were perhaps the most precision-guided of all the ordnance that was used by British forces during those operations.

The problem with that submarine class is still an embarrassment, in the sense that only one of 12 hunter-killer submarines can be deployed, and that must inevitably raise questions about the necessary support for Trident; and about the extent to which we could, in an emergency, utilise the deterrent effect of the deployment of a submarine, and also the use of submarines for clandestine or covert operations of the type that the special forces are often called on to perform.

Nevertheless, I took some further encouragement from the fact that the Secretary of State appears to have a rather more open mind on the question of the fitting of the type 45 destroyers with a Tomahawk capability. If flexibility is to be an important part of the training, the attitude and the deployment of the personnel of the armed services, it makes a great deal of sense to have flexibility in the platforms that we are likely to use in future. The Tomahawk cruise missile, with its capability for precision, is obviously a very important addition to the United Kingdom's defence capability and it reflects the closeness of the relationship between the United Kingdom and America that those missiles are supplied to us. I believe that only one other country—Australia—has access to that weapons system.

I do think—this is just a rehearsal of a point that I made last week when the matter was dealt with in a statement by the Minister for the Armed Forces—that we now have a very potent and significant opportunity to enhance European co-operation. Our French allies have six hunter-killer submarines and as we know, four nuclear submarines, SSBNs—strategic submarine ballistic nuclear—and it seems entirely sensible to use the restrictions under which the British fleet will have to operate as a mechanism for discussing, and perhaps putting into operation, a far greater degree of co-operation with the French. There is already a measure of co-operation in nuclear matters. It is the co-operation that dare not speak its name, but this would be an opportunity to see just how closely the two navies could co-operate with each other.

I make all these arguments with a certain feeling of what Burns, the famous Scottish poet, once described as the "unco guid"—those who feel over-confident in their own righteousness—because when the Upholder sale was first proposed I was one of those who opposed it, but I never thought that my opposition would be demonstrated to be so well founded quite so quickly.

I turn now to an issue—this is rather on the bran tub principle of the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook)—that is now causing a great deal of concern on both sides of the House and in the other place: the crash of the Chinook helicopter on the Mull of Kintyre. I am not the only one to have a deep sense of unease about the finding of negligence made against the deceased pilots. However, I want to make it clear at the outset of this passage of my speech that I do not believe that there is any question of bad faith, or of cover-up or anything of that kind. I believe that a mistake has been made, and that that mistake should be put right.

I was one of those who first became involved when I was approached by the family of one of the pilots. Notably, the anxiety about these matters, which, to begin with, was shared by just four or five of us, is spreading throughout the House. One need only look at the Order Paper to see the number of questions that are now being tabled as demonstrating an interest on the part of many hon. and right hon. Members about whether the decision taken, with particular regard to the finding of negligence, should be allowed to stand.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the RAF's own regulations at the time provided that before a finding of negligence could be made, every other possible cause had to be excluded. The RAF's regulation applied a higher standard than the standard in a criminal court. A person could be convicted of murder in this country on a lower standard than the RAF's own regulation required before a finding of negligence could be held to be established.

We had in Scotland a fatal accident inquiry, which is roughly equivalent to a coroner's inquest although different in some material respects. Sheriff Sir Stephen Young, a most careful, thorough and conscientious middle-ranking judge in Scotland, conducted the inquiry and, at the end of it, he had to apply the civil standard of the balance of probability—the lowest of the three standards of proof. After 16 days of evidence in a process in which all the relevant interests were represented and the pilots representatives were able to ask questions in cross-examination, Sheriff Sir Stephen Young refused to accept on a balance of probability—that low standard of proof—that the Ministry of Defence account had been established sufficiently in the evidence put before him. That is a most significant feature of the whole case.

My motive is not the embarrassment of the Ministry of the Defence or the Government. Only eight or nine days ago, there was much debate in the Chamber about the purpose of Parliament and the role of parliamentarians. I have always thought that Parliament existed for the redress of grievances and the families of the two pilots—the Tapper and the Cook families—most certainly have a grievance. In my judgment, it is high time that Parliament gave them redress.

On Sierra Leone, there are three clear foreign policy objectives in our presence there. The first is to sustain the legitimate Government of a Commonwealth country of which the United Kingdom is the former colonial power. The second is to protect innocent civilians from the brutality of the rebel factions and the third is to help to preserve the rule of law and to ensure the human rights of the citizens of that country.

What are the military means to be used to achieve those foreign policy objectives? I support the training to a sufficiently high standard of a sufficient number of troops to provide the legitimate Government with the means of enforcing their writ throughout the whole country. I have seen that taking place at first hand. It is entirely sensible, and it is precisely the sort of objective that the United

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Kingdom should support and help to bring about. I also believe that, as part of the military means of achieving the foreign policy objectives to which I have referred, we have an obligation to provide support to a United Nations force that consists of an adequate number of competent troops properly equipped to fulfil the United Nations mandate.

In May this year, the UN effort nearly collapsed. Only United Kingdom intervention saved it from ignominy. Those of us who went to Sierra Leone at the invitation of the Secretary of State for Defence know that the UN effort has been very largely prejudiced by personality clashes and jealousies on the military and civilian sides. We do not need to go into them now, but they have undoubtedly had a significant effect on the UN effort in that country. That effort has unquestionably been undermined by the withdrawal of the Indian and Jordanian troops, who represented some of the best troops offered to the UN for service in Sierra Leone.

I understand from anecdotal evidence that the United Kingdom Government are now seeking to persuade other European countries that have armed forces of a high standard to make a contribution to the UN force. What chance of success is there in persuading other European countries to become part of the UN force if we are not willing to join it ourselves? Today, we hear reports of the entirely welcome appointment of Brigadier Alastair Duncan to be the chief of staff of the UN force. If we are good enough and sufficiently committed enough to provide the chief of staff, why not provide some forces themselves?

The UN is present in Sierra Leone to provide a necessary support for the Government forces to enable their task to be achieved quickly and effectively. The present arrangements are more likely to prolong the United Kingdom involvement rather than to shorten it—more likely to delay the achievement of the foreign policy objectives that I set out earlier.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The right hon. and learned Gentleman and I were both in Sierra Leone in July. Does he accept that, for whatever reason, the UN lacked the determination to take on the rebels and push them back from the areas that they held? That is why the country remains so destabilised and why the vacuum that is created tends to suck in British involvement. If the UN had such determination, that might lead to a quicker solution and put the Government of Sierra Leone into a stronger position.

Mr. Campbell: I have a great deal of sympathy for that view. The hon. Gentleman may recall that it was explained to us that the trained forces of the Government were to be responsible for taking ground and that the UN should follow them and hold that ground. That suggests that one cannot draw an artificial distinction between training a sufficient number of suitably competent Government forces and the UN effort. They are two sides of the same coin. The duration of the commitment in Sierra Leone can only be lengthened by the fact—as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out—that there appeared to be no sufficient enthusiasm or drive at the top or elsewhere in the UN force to fulfil its mandate. It is not a question of the terms of the mandate, but of the political willingness to enforce it.

On Kosovo, we have recently received the report of the Select Committee on Defence. So far as the report makes a point about the ruling out of a ground campaign from the beginning, that vindicates the position taken on behalf of the Liberal Democrats by my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown), who consistently argued that the threat of ground attack should be maintained. So far as the report says that air power alone did not achieve success in Kosovo, I agree with it. So far as it suggests that Russian influence on Mr. Milosevic should not be discounted, I agree with it, too. However, I cannot avoid the recollection in this most adversarial of Chambers that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) was at pains to call for the ground option to be ruled out at the very beginning of the operation.

The report identifies shortcomings in equipment. Many of them were well known and date from much earlier than the life of this Government. The report identifies that mistakes were made and that things might have been done differently. All of that is true, but much of the report seems to be an assembly of earlier evidence on the Kosovo operations. It is expressed in language that I regard as unduly apocalyptic, and I can corroborate my view by comparing the language of the report with the extremely measured speech made by the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), last Thursday in a debate that was ostensibly about defence procurement.

Those who criticise the Kosovo operations because of their consequences should be put to the test of telling us their analysis of what the consequences would have been if there had been no intervention. The 800,000 people who were driven out of Kosovo had absolutely no doubt in their minds as to what was required. I heard that directly from some of the people whom I met in one of the refugee camps that I visited with the then Secretary of State for Defence, Lord Robertson.

We may not have won as well or as easily in Kosovo as we would have wished, and present circumstances may be far from ideal, but it is worth reminding ourselves that, after years of repression and months of persecution, arcadia or utopia are difficult to build. We are entitled to draw encouragement from the successful conduct of local government elections in the past few days.

I am in no doubt whatever that the conduct of any war and this war in particular requires a blunt post-mortem examination. For example, lack of precision-guided munitions and the use of cluster bombs—to which the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) referred and about which I feel considerable apprehension—were severe defects in NATO's armoury and they led to an excess of civilian casualties.

We should acknowledge that. If we are to improve and if we want to avoid civilian casualties, we might need to invest in some more expensive weapons. It is notable that the most vociferous critics of the use of cluster bombs or the absence of precision-guided munitions have rarely been the most enthusiastic supporters of any increase in defence expenditure.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): On the success of the operation in Kosovo, is the right hon. and learned

Gentleman pleased with the outcome of the recent local elections, in which the party of Ibrahim Rugova—one of the moderates in Kosovo—was elected?

Mr. Campbell: The hon. Gentleman makes a sound political point. Let us remember that Dr. Rugova was, as it were, pushed to one side just before the worst of the excesses of the Serbs, and exiled to Italy. For some time, Mr. Thaci appeared to hold centre stage politically. The interesting feature of the elections is that Dr. Rugova appears to have regained his prominence, although Mr. Thaci won a significant percentage of the vote and therefore a significant percentage of seats. Not only the facts but the outcome of the elections is encouraging.

It is my firm belief that without intervention—however flawed and imperfect it may have been—rape, murder and brutality would have won the day and Milosevic would have been even more difficult to dislodge than he ultimately proved to be.

The subject of Kosovo leads me neatly to discussion of the European security and defence policy, which has bulked large in this afternoon's proceedings. It now appears that, if George W. Bush becomes United States President, Miss Condoleeza Rice and Mr. Colin Powell are likely to be driving forces in the Bush Administration. One would have to search assiduously to find any evidence on the record of their enthusiasm for any United States presence in the Balkans.

Mr. Powell was the subject of that rather withering question from Madeleine Albright at the height of the difficulties in Bosnia, when he once again made the case that not a single American soldier should be there on the ground. Madeleine Albright famously asked him, "Well, what are all those soldiers for, then?" He holds a perfectly legitimate position, but has a long history of not wanting United States involvement on the ground in Europe—so, too, Condoleeza Rice.

The Secretary-General of NATO, Lord Robertson, our former Secretary of State for Defence, is reported in today's newspapers as saying that he thinks that the Bush Administration would not withdraw troops from the Balkans. The fact that he has to say that shows that there is some doubt. That doubt is in some measure corroborated by reports in American newspapers over the past 10 days that suggest something rather different.

That tells us—it certainly tells me—that a European security and defence policy is not desirable but necessary. Europe left to its own devices—save in the matter of collective security under article 5 of the Washington treaty, by which the United States would always regard itself as bound—must find the means of organising its resources so that capability is maintained. We should not shrink from the conclusion that capability may require additional expenditure. Too often, that is finessed in European capitals by saying that we must spend better rather than more. It might be possible to spend better, but if we want to maintain capability in an area where the inflation rate is always higher than either the underlying or headline rates in the countries concerned, additional expenditure might be necessary.

How can we possibly provide 60,000 troops who are capable of rapid deployment, properly supported and capable of being sustained for 12 months, unless they are properly funded and resourced? I say to those who have sometimes a visceral anti-Europeanism that the truth is that a strong ESDP will strengthen NATO, but a weak one would undoubtedly damage it. That is why I have no doubt that if we wish to strengthen NATO, we must demonstrate first, that there is a much stronger European commitment to it, and secondly, that, if necessary, in the absence of the United States, Turkey and other members of NATO but not of the European Union, Europe can act alone. That is also why I argue firmly for what is called the right of first refusal.

I was disappointed that the Secretary of State was a little dismissive of such a proposal. It has great merit—militarily and politically. It ensures that NATO—by which I mean all its members—will never be left out. It particularly deals with the problems of Turkey, which was one of NATO's guardians of the southern flank for so long and which has not yet been admitted to the EU—for some good and compelling reasons. To Turkey, European Union membership is a matter of some psychological anxiety. The proposal would ensure that it would not feel in some way eliminated from such considerations.

The proposal would also deal with the problem of the countries that have recently joined NATO, such as the Czech Republic and Hungary, which immediately had to take some difficult decisions in the course of the Kosovo operations, only to find that there might be European activity from which they would be excluded because they are not EU members. That is damaging to the fabric of NATO and its cohesion.

The right of first refusal, which does not seem to be as difficult to organise as the Secretary of State appeared to think, would mean that the first group of people to consider a crisis would be NATO ambassadors in Brussels. What could be better designed to ensure that NATO felt that it was not being pushed to one side by European enthusiasts and zealots?

Mr. Gerald Howarth: How does the right hon. and learned Gentleman square his natural anxieties, which we all share, with the very clear statement of some of our European partners that they see the creation of the force as an embryonic European army? Surely that poses a threat to the very heart of NATO, which he is anxious to protect.

Mr. Campbell: There would be a threat to NATO only if there were universal acceptance of the position that the hon. Gentleman describes. The United Kingdom Government are not alone in saying, as I understand, that they are not in favour of what is loosely described as a "European army". If, as the hon. Gentleman says, all EU members were to sign up to some of the rather overblown rhetoric, the risk would exist. However, let us remember that the treaties provide for nothing other than unanimity.

It is worth reminding some of our Conservative friends that the fons et origo of much of this debate is the Maastricht treaty. The shadow Defence Secretary has, shall we say, taken a consistent position on the Maastricht treaty. I was about to say an honourable position—

Mr. Howarth: And honourable.

Mr. Campbell: Very well; I shall concede that his position is honourable, too. However, that was not his party's position, as others may remember. Those of us who survived will remember three-line Whips, 10 o'clock

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votes and 10 o'clock business motions that could not be moved. The beginning of all this was Maastricht—the treaty that the then Prime Minister exhorted and abjured us all to support.

Dr. Godman: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell: I should like to make a little progress and deal with national missile defence.

The United States' determination to proceed with national missile defence depends on a flawed assessment of threat. It is true that there are rogue states or states of concern. There are some deeply unpleasant regimes, but we must ask ourselves whether they are so lacking in comprehension that they would threaten to use, or actually use, weapons of mass destruction against the overwhelming nuclear and conventional military superiority of the United States. I simply do not believe that they would. The classic definition of threat is capability plus intention. States of concern might acquire the capability, but it is difficult to envisage circumstances in which they would have the intention of using it because of the extraordinarily damaging, even apocalyptic, consequences of doing so.

Mr. Frank Cook: Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that it was the Korean flight of the Taepo Dong II across Japan that gave rise to the hysteria in the United States; and that now, with improved relations between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong Il recently cemented by Madeleine Albright, that hysteria will fade away?

Mr. Campbell: Traditionally, there were four states of concern. In respect of Iran, we are doing our best to ensure that Mr. Khatami's efforts to modernise that country receive as much encouragement as is helpful to him—but not too much, in case it makes his domestic position difficult. Colonel Gaddafi of Libya has made available the two persons alleged to have committed the Lockerbie bombing. Madeleine Albright has paid a visit to North Korea and I understand that the United Kingdom is about to open an embassy there. As for Iraq, the policy is one of containment and has been for the past 10 years. It strikes me that those four states, often cited as the raison d'etre of national missile defence, do not measure up to the seriousness with which they are apparently regarded by some on Capitol Hill.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Surely, the right hon. and learned Gentleman is approaching the matter from the wrong angle. Two problems remain: first, that those states continue to develop and to obtain such missiles—I mentioned Iran recently testing a missile with a range of about 900 miles; and secondly, the terrorist threat. However, the real point is that the overwhelming capabilities of NATO show such states that a conventional conflict precludes the possibility of them influencing events, whereas a cheap, simple option is available whereby they use threats to get their way. The west's fear might deliver a different result from the one that was achieved in Kosovo.

Mr. Campbell: The consequence is to destroy the basis on which the nuclear balance has been maintained for the past 30 or 40 years—deterrence. The anti-ballistic missile treaty was entered into to preserve the principle of deterrence.

It is worth noting that in the "Joint Vision 2020" document, United States defence planners identified China as a potential threat to US security in the 21st century. Are we expected to believe that, once a so-called limited missile defence has been established to protect the US from states of concern, domestic pressure in the US will not grow to expand it to cover larger missile capabilities? Can the US square the circle by insisting on protection against North Korea, but accepting vulnerability to China?

If the system is deployed in a limited fashion, the case will be made to deploy it far more extensively, which will trigger a response in the form of an increased effort to increase nuclear capability. The Chinese have already made that plain. That would inevitably evoke a response from India, which would, in turn, evoke one from Pakistan. How will the United States profit if global security systems are rejected in favour of competition between states to increase nuclear stockpiles? NMD will neither provide the security for which its supporters hope, nor bring stability and certainty to the rest of us. NMD has a remarkable capacity for damaging relations within NATO, weakening the cohesion of that alliance and dividing Europe from the United States.

NMD will undermine the principle of deterrence on which the fragile strategic balance is built at a time when opportunities to achieve an overall reduction in nuclear weapons have never been greater. As Russia encounters increasing economic difficulty in maintaining nuclear weapons, we are presented with an obvious opportunity to negotiate, through a START 3 treaty, far greater reductions on both sides than have previously been envisaged. It would be a great pity if those opportunities were to be given up. Matters are not made easier by the fact that the United States Senate rejected ratification of the comprehensive test ban treaty. That decision carries considerable implications—at least in the mind of those in the Duma—regarding the extent to which multilateral nuclear disarmament can be achieved and maintained.

In its recent report on weapons of mass destruction, the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs said:

> it is incumbent on the Government, as one of the five nuclear weapons states and a close ally of the United States, to make an early public statement on its analysis of NMD's likely impact on strategic stability and its assessment of whether this would be in the overall security interests of this country.

I agree—indeed, it might be the only aspect of NMD on which I agree with the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith). The Government must clearly state their position. It is hugely disingenuous to say that, because no request has been made, they have not considered what their answer would be. If that is true, if I may put it flippantly, what the devil are all the people in the nuclear planning group doing at the Ministry of Defence? There is no card game in town other than NMD and its consequences for nuclear policy in its entirety. The Government should have a position on the matter and the debate would be helped by their stating it—at least we would know whether Ministers agreed with me or with

the shadow Defence Secretary. It is a matter of such seriousness that we are entitled to a clear picture of the Government's stance.

Dr. Godman: The right hon. and learned Gentleman mentions the Foreign Affairs Committee, of which I am a member. It said that if a new occupant of the White House sought to implement NMD, there would be profound consequences for the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. Our report also pointed out that terrorists—mentioned repeatedly by the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith)—can carry powerful devices in something as small as a suitcase. What can NMD do in that respect?

Mr. Campbell: I remember a briefing from the director of military intelligence when I was a member of the Select Committee on Defence. I believe that the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) was also present. The director produced a flask about 4in high containing about half a pint of liquid: he said that, by putting it in the London water supply, he could get rid of all the people in London. It seems extraordinary to erect a system that will destabilise the balance of deterrence and has the capacity to cause problems with the cohesion of the alliance in the knowledge that something so small that one could put it in one's hip pocket could achieve what one is trying to prevent without there being any question of identification or anything of that sort. NMD is extremely important, and it is high time the Government told us what their position is.

This is probably the last defence debate before Remembrance day 2000, but such is the state of the Government's management of business that we cannot discount the possibility that we shall be here next week. We talk about defence in the abstract, although some of us have experience of its reality and some of us—voyeur-like—have seen the reality when we visit places such as Kosovo and Sierra Leone. In 10 days' time, at cenotaphs up and down the country—not only here in London, but at tiny war memorials in villages throughout our constituencies—we shall remember those who made a sacrifice for their country. As we talk about defence in the abstract, we do well to remember that those of us who have responsibility for policy and the obligation to influence it have not been called on to make the sacrifice that many ordinary men and women here in the United Kingdom have had to make, and we should never allow their sacrifice to be far from our minds.

6.29 pm

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): It is a privilege to be able to take up the remarks of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). Once again, he made an extremely good speech which contained some important points. I associate myself with his remarks about the remembrance services that will be taking place shortly. I associate myself also with the references to the sterling work that has been undertaken by our armed forces in the past year, and even since we last had a full defence debate.

The right hon. and learned Member talks a great deal of sense. It is sad that the Opposition, in an important debate on defence and the armed forces, produce a load of xenophobic claptrap. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) concentrated almost entirely on anti-Europeanism instead of dealing with some of the key defence issues that face the United Kingdom, especially given the many changes that have taken place in the past three years, and especially in the past year alone.

I was horrified to hear the aspersions cast on the former Secretary-General of NATO, Mr. Solana. It was a disgrace that he was referred to in the terms used by Conservative Members. He had an excellent record as Secretary-General. He had to deal with difficult situations in the Balkans and elsewhere, and I think that he did a first-class job.

A strange attitude is being adopted by the Conservative party, which is becoming increasingly isolationist. It is talking more and more to itself and to nobody else. It is so fixated with Europe that it cannot address the serious issues that arise in this debate.

Mr. Robathan: Usually, I do not presume to speak on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), who is sadly not in his place. If the hon. Gentleman studies the record, I think he will find that when Mr. Solana was a Minister in the Spanish Government, he campaigned for the withdrawal of Spain from NATO. Subsequently, he may have been an excellent Secretary-General of NATO. One of the objections raised by some was that he had campaigned to leave NATO in his early days. I am delighted that he changed his mind.

Mr. Smith: There is no question that Mr. Solana did a terrific job in bringing consensus within the 19 countries of NATO. He engaged in one of the most difficult actions that the organisation has ever faced. The references to him were outrageous. That demonstrates how much the Opposition are out of touch on defence. It was once a great party, which for many years claimed to be the party of defence. After this afternoon's performance, it can no longer claim that. It may be the party that is opposed to Europe.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made a ground-breaking speech at St. Malo. It has been fallaciously portrayed as a U-turn from his previous comments at Amsterdam, but it will stand the test of time. My right hon. Friend said that the defence of Europe will always be left to NATO, and it will. There is no question that under the European security and defence policy, article 5 missions will be carried out by NATO at any time. The defence and common security of Europe will always remain the role of NATO. That is what the Prime Minister has said.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I ask the hon. Gentleman to address the point more closely. Article 5 prescribes that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all. I am sure that he is right in what he has said about that. Some of us are concerned that if there were to be a crisis that developed and was made subject to crisis management techniques under the European security and defence policy, it could escalate, with other countries being drawn in, in a way that could lead to a result which would not have been brought about if NATO had been involved at the outset.

Mr. Smith: I should like to move on and perhaps address some of the genuine concerns that have arisen in

[Mr. Smith]

the debate. Before doing so, I shall return to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. He said that he would not support an unrealistic defence and security policy for Europe. Nothing that has happened and nothing said at St. Malo has had that effect. Crucially, however, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green talks about the strategy that was inherited by the Government from the previous Government, which was that of building a European pillar of defence capability within NATO. The simple truth is that it was not working. NATO countries in Europe were not increasing their capability. Indeed, that capability was reducing, and that is still happening.

Under the previous Government, United Kingdom defence forces were not capable of committing assets to NATO to allow it to carry out its defence and security role. That is what Kosovo proved.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will cast his mind further back, when we had to put an armoured division into the desert during the Gulf war. It was commonly said that we were able to do that only by cannibalising the tanks of three divisions. It was said also that there was not a working tank left in Germany.

Mr. Smith: Absolutely. The absence of those resources along with those of heavy lift and logistical support in the field were inherited by the Government. However, the Opposition have tried to tell us that they had a strategy for building capability within NATO. I am privileged to have a role in the NATO parliamentary assembly, as have other Members in the Chamber, and it is my belief that there is no conflict between the goals of a European security and defence policy and a commitment to NATO as the first line of defence for Europe—that is as long as it is done properly and as long as the necessary capabilities are produced. That is the key.

We are not talking of duplicated defence capabilities. They are not even capabilities in most other European countries except the UK. They are not even capabilities that exist now. Anything that we can do to build defence capabilities in other European Union countries will enhance our contribution to NATO and will strengthen NATO. That was the lesson of Kosovo.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on his presentation. We have had a defence strategy and policy for three and a half years. Three weeks ago, I was in Copenhagen attending a Rose-Roth seminar of the NATO parliamentary assembly. I was delighted to hear the Minister of Defence of Denmark paying tribute to the British strategic defence review and our contribution to defence. It was a seminar on security in northern Europe and the contribution to defence in Europe. The Minister specifically paid tribute to the role of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the St. Malo accord. He recognised, as we all should, that it is inconceivable that there should be the development of a European security and defence policy without Britain taking a lead role.

It is inconceivable that the policy should be left to the French, the Germans or anyone else. It is right that we should play a leading role. We have the forces to contribute; we have the experience and professionalism; and most important of all we have a reputation throughout Europe and the whole of NATO for excellence in military matters and military service. It is right that a British Prime Minister should exploit that to the full. He has done that, and there will be a British stamp on any European security and defence policy.

I agree that we must get the policy right. We must provide a mechanism for decision making that does not exclude NATO members, especially the non-European countries. I understand that that is precisely the issue that is now being addressed. I believe that there is already a commitment to involve all NATO countries, whether members of the European Union or not, in the crucial early stages of any decision-making process. The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife talked about giving NATO first refusal. I believe that, given NATO command structures and the massive military technology gap between north America and Europe, it is inconceivable that NATO will not have the first option in any Petersberg-type missions.

I believe that the Government's defence policy has been excellent—although not perfect, because there are problems. The review addressed the real and changing security threats that we face in the world. The real challenge is not to come up with a first-class review, but to ensure that it is implemented in full.

Mr. Hancock: The hon. Gentleman asked my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) about the elections in Kosovo. I would be interested to know what the hon. Gentleman thinks about those election results, and whether he believes that they lessen or increase the tension in the area.

Mr. Smith: I am greatly encouraged by those elections. A conflict or a war invariably results in the complete breakdown of civil society and order. Those elections signal a return to normality and to moderate politics in that part of the world. I hope that I am proved right about that, although it is not an exact science.

The Government have an excellent record on defence policy. Even though the review was claimed to be policy-led, there was huge criticism and people asked where the foreign policy guidelines were. The reality is that we were the first NATO member country to anticipate the changing security role and security environment in the world, and we were the first to begin to reconfigure our forces in readiness for that changed role and for the greater emphasis being placed on out-of-area, non-article 5 activity and humanitarian and crisis missions.

This is the first defence debate since the announcement of the outcome of the comprehensive spending review. I am delighted that the Government have had the courage to stop the constant cuts in the defence budget and to recognise that the challenges we now face require more defence expenditure, not less. The threats are much less predictable than they were before, and our ability to respond flexibly and with speed needs to be much greater.

There is a good story to tell. The work of defence is changing and has changed dramatically in the past few years from the security of our domestic territory to a role policing human rights, providing humanitarian relief and avoiding conflict and war, not engaging in it or creating it. We should try to get that message across more often to engender greater public support for the superb role of our

defence forces in the changing environment. We should do that throughout Europe in countries that are cutting their defence budgets even more than the previous UK Government—although that is hard to imagine. They cut it by 32 per cent. in real terms after the end of the cold war. That dangerous cut left us widely exposed. Thankfully, we are now starting to shore up those budgets again.

Anything that will help our European partners to persuade their respective populations that there is a good case for increasing their defence expenditure to meet their NATO capabilities first and their ESDP capabilities second must be a damn good thing, and I would support it. Anyone who has the true interests of the defence of this nation and peace in the rest of the world at heart must recognise that challenge. It is a great pity that members of the once great Conservative party are always bashing Europe.

I should like to draw the House's attention to a couple of matters of great concern that affect my constituents. One of the objectives of the strategic defence review was to provide much more jointery and tri-service provision to cut out waste and duplication, and to create smart procurement. An important part of that strategy was the creation of the Defence Aviation Repair Agency, which I am delighted to say has its headquarters in my constituency. It has about 4,800 civilian and military personnel. It used to be a 4:1 ratio of military to civilian personnel, but that has now been reversed: there are about 800 military staff and 4,000 civilian.

It has come to my notice in the past week that there is great concern among employees at DARA headquarters in RAF St. Athan that there could be a relocation of the aero-engine maintenance and repair facility at St. Athan to the south of England, to Fleetlands in Gosport. I draw that to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench. I do not know whether a decision has been taken: I can only express the concern of many DARA employees.

My concern is not so much about the numbers of jobs involved—although it could be as many as 200 highly skilled and, for the south Wales region, relatively highly paid jobs—but about the nature of the jobs that we may lose not just in my constituency but in the south Wales area. I recognise the role of the new agency, which will become a fundholder—I am not sure whether it is one yet—and will be a stand-alone body, based on the commercial imperative. However, it spends public money and should be publicly accountable.

I hope that full consideration will be given to the decision and its possible impact, particularly on the aviation industry in south Wales, which hon. Members may be surprised to hear is a very large and successful industry. Once gone, highly specialised aviation jobs are gone for ever. The cost of recruiting and training such numbers is so great that it is impossible to get those jobs back. We have not only a thriving defence aviation industry in south Wales, but a thriving commercial aviation industry, of which repair and maintenance of engines is a major part.

There has been a link—a synergy—between the private and the public sector in the aviation industry, in respect of not just engines, but airframes as well. I am fearful of the impact that the decision will have on the commercial jobs in the area could result in the disappearance of the critical mass of skills necessary to maintain a successful industry. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will have an opportunity to look into that and perhaps comment on it at the end of the debate. I fear that the impact on the entire industry in south Wales could be devastating, and I should like my fears removed, if possible.

I want an assessment to be undertaken into the possible impact of such a decision, if indeed such a decision is to be taken. I also seek an assurance about the future of RAF St. Athan and the area as the headquarters of DARA and the providers of excellent services in airframe maintenance and repair. I hope that that will expand as DARA develops and possibly starts to attract military tri-service aviation work not just for UK plc, but for countries abroad. I seek assurances on the future of DARA in my constituency.

Finally, and regrettably, I must return to a topic that I first raised in the House on 13 April, in the previous defence debate. An aspect of service personnel welfare about which I am deeply worried is the provision of married quarters and the role of the Defence Housing Executive and Annington Homes. My local experience tells me that we have not got it right.

It saddens me to have to raise the matter again. In the previous debate, I mentioned the case of Mrs. Colette Howard, from my constituency, whose husband Corporal Howard has served 19 years in the Royal Air Force and is coming up to retirement. I drew the attention of the House to the fact that that poor family, on a single posting at the RAF station, had not been moved the usual once, but three times. For most of us, moving house is a traumatic experience, but service personnel must learn to live with it. They often have to move lock, stock and barrel on every company posting, and we all know how stressful that can be.

I reported to the House that Mr. and Mrs. Howard had been asked to move three times on a single posting, and I am pleased that following the intervention of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State, they received a letter of apology from the DHE and were eventually offered accommodation that was far more suitable than the accommodation originally presented to them.

Believe it or not, since that intervention the Howards have been asked to move again. Even worse and even more harrowing is the fact that in the meantime, Corporal Howard has suffered a heart condition, which is almost certainly related to the stress to which he has been subjected as a result of the activities of the Defence Housing Executive.

This is not an isolated incident. A number of service wives have come to me about the housing situation at RAF St. Athan, as they usually bear the brunt of it and have to put up with it. Judging from our local experience, I suspect that the problem is widespread throughout the country.

Unprecedentedly, senior officers of the camp have approached me. That has never been known before. They expressed to me their concern that the camaraderie among the officer cadre is being undermined because of the way in which officers below the rank of wing commander are being treated with regard to accommodation for their wives and families. Their experience reads like a horror story. They have been moved repeatedly during a two-year tour and served with eviction notices while they were away on holiday with their families. All that is creating a great problem of morale in the camp.

[Mr. Smith]

I am an ex-service man. I met and married my wife in the services, and I am aware of the pressures that can be placed on families in service life. There is a great myth that those in the uniformed disciplined services have no right of redress, and that when some injustice is done to them or their families, they cannot get anything done about it. Of course, anyone who has had service experience knows that nothing could be further from the truth.

If I had a problem when I was a service man, I could go to my station warrant officer and explain that it was creating hardship. I could go to the commanding officer, or indeed to the old personnel flight, which I think is still in existence, and good luck to it. They would all intervene and assist in matters such as housing, schooling, pressures on the family and postings. However, with regard to married quarters, that option no longer exists.

The problem must be addressed quickly by the Ministry of Defence. There is no redress or recourse for service personnel being dealt with in such a despicable way. They can go to their personnel flight or their commanding officer, as they have all done, and the commanding officer can go to the Defence Housing Executive, but the commanding officer has no authority over the DHE, which is dependent on the leasing policy of Annington Homes. The situation is a mish-mash.

All those who have spoken in the debate have paid tribute to our service personnel for the fine work that they are doing throughout the world and at home. It is unacceptable that their families should be treated in that way. I do not pretend to know the answer, but I offer a suggestion. Officers and other ranks living in married quarters and trying to raise their families, with enough pressure coming from service life anyway, have no recourse and no redress, as they should have. We should consider creating as soon as possible some sort of organisation. I am reluctant to use the term tenants association, but we should set up a military equivalent because nobody is listening or taking action, and I am not prepared to sit back and watch my constituents forced into ill health for serving their country. I hope that my hon. Friends will consider the matter.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in the debate. In conclusion, I pay tribute to the excellent work of the service men and women of this country.

7 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): A view that used to be held in the House, and to which I subscribe, was that a debate should be a debate, and not simply the delivery of several prepared speeches. I therefore compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), who opened the debate for the Conservative party, on the way in which he outlined beyond peradventure the Prime Minister's volte face on some European defence matters. People can change their minds, but such changes should be brought out in the open. My hon. Friend did that admirably.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) has left. I wished to pay tribute to him, because I do not know how many hon. Members realise that it was the hon. Gentleman who, in the North Atlantic Assembly 12 or 14 years ago, began the battle to ban land mines. He persuaded Canada to move on the matter, and this country and Europe to support the proposal. He deserves much praise for that.

I support one of the points that the hon. Member for Stockton, North made today. Ministers should reconsider the decision to abandon the royal tournament, and they should re-establish the Aldershot tattoo, if my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) will allow it. They were marvellous events during which the young people of this country could learn something about the military forces. Seeing what the different branches of the military were able to achieve in those presentations was a significant recruiting factor for many people.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) carries the British banner in the North Atlantic Assembly with great credit. However, I disagreed with some of his remarks about Sierra Leone today. Our involvement there is becoming deeper and deeper because of the number of military personnel that we have to put in to support the civil Government. I am worried about that. The United Nations does not appear to take the matter nearly as seriously as the Foreign Secretary. We must be wary of that.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife also mentioned Kosovo, in relation to which I must declare a personal interest. My wife is the British chairman of International Social Services, which is a charity that works for the unification of broken families. She has recently been to Kosovo, where the organisation was establishing a unit in Pristina to deal with the many thousands of children who are left without families. She said that it was all very well for the members of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs when they visited Kosovo—they are met and looked after, and receive food and accommodation—but that going there as a single lady with the secretary general of the ISS was different. None of those amenities was provided.

My wife said that I ought to point out in the House that the co-ordination of the different military personnel to maintain law and order left much to be desired—indeed, was almost non-existent. She said that the idea that United Nations personnel were in control there was a myth. The United Nations side of operations is not a matter for the Ministry of Defence. However, it might examine the co-ordination between the different military forces.

The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) spent much time trying to belittle the Conservative Government's work on defence. I remind him that the great success of NATO, which everyone now claims to be marvellous, was a massive part of the Conservative Government's work on defence. That work consisted of keeping 50,000 men in Germany and dealing with the unrest and difficulties that arose in relation to atomic weapons. The Conservative Government had to carry out those tasks to ensure that NATO became the success that it is.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: My right hon. Friend has made an extremely important point. Will he remind the House that we took that principled stand in the teeth of wholesale opposition from the Labour party, then in opposition, which opposed all our actions to secure NATO, protect our borders and ensure the ultimate defeat of communism?

Sir Peter Emery: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but I was trying not to raise the temperature. I want to get to the main part of my speech.

The collapse of the Berlin wall, the end of the Russian-American stand-off and the proven success of NATO has largely rendered obsolete the traditional categories into which the fear of world war had previously thrust us. The old traditional distinctions between east and west no longer apply. Nowadays, we have to look around us and ask, "Who and where is the foe?"

NATO has made great strides in modernising itself. Thank goodness that America and Canada have accepted the need to remain an integral part of NATO. None the less, important questions remain unaltered and unanswered. How far should NATO extend its tentacles? How can Russia be included, so that it can share and participate in the defence of freedom now that it is stretching out to embrace democracy and human rights? At what point will the role of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe begin to impinge on defence matters, as Russia would wish? What is new for the House to consider?

The Government have taken positive action to create a European security and defence initiative. It would seem reasonable, in time, for Europe not to have to call on the United States for everything to do with defence or security in Europe. We must accept that the United States has been calling for Europe to pick up more of the bill for the defence of Europe. However, I stress with all my strength that the ESDI must not detract from the role of and need for NATO.

Let us presume, for argument's sake, that the ESDI is a good thing. It may well be—we shall have to wait and see. Nevertheless, some major questions arise. Would there be an equal contribution to a rapid reaction force of 60,000 men—20,000 from Britain, 20,000 from France and 20,000 from Germany? Will Britain, or France and Britain, be called on to provide a larger share of manpower, with Germany falling behind? Is that not likely, in view of the current problems in Germany on defence matters, and the deployment of German troops overseas?

What about the cost? Is there again to be an equal share for the United Kingdom, France and Germany? May that not become difficult, given that France and Germany are experiencing major cuts in defence expenditure? As British military manpower is already stretched, will we not require more recruits? Will this not require more expenditure which cannot be met within the present defence review targets?

Let me return to a question that I asked the Secretary of State during Defence questions on Monday. Whence will come the heavy lift potential to move 60,000 men, all the equipment—arms, ammunition, victuals and transport—and the back-up for the force? If the arrangements are to be independent of NATO, and are not to deplete our reserves and manpower for our present vast commitments, there must surely be an increase in Army manpower. There will also be a greater need for heavy transportation and lift to enable the Royal Air Force, where it is a strategic necessity, to meet our present commitments.

These plans were established, after a vast amount of heart-searching in the defence review, as a strategic retirement long before the ESDI was anywhere near being a realistic concept. How many more men and how much more money will be involved? Where is the heavy lift to come from, if we are not to deplete our existing requirements? Do we expect France and Germany to purchase C17s and A400Ms?

I visited Paris last week with the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. We interviewed French Members of Parliament, including Mr. Vedrine, the Foreign Affairs Minister, and Mr. Richard, the Defence Minister. With Mr. Richard were a number of very senior French officers. In discussion, I raised the matter of acquiring the lift capacity for the rapid reaction force in relation to France. Mr. Richard's response was that "they must not have to rely for long on American lift capacity".

A three-star French general and I left the meeting together. I asked, "Independent lift capacity, in 10 years?" There came the rather depressed reply, "Mon ami, quinze ans"—15 years. If that is the thinking of some of the French military, we should take note of it.

In the context of all the planning for the new defence initiative, let me say something about the deteriorating role of the Western European Union. I understand that it is accepted that the WEU will become surplus to requirements. Will the Minister confirm that? If it is the case, will he tell us what will become of, or be done with, the WEU parliamentary assembly? Will it somehow be merged with the NATO parliamentary assembly? If not, will it become a Committee, and organise part of the working of the European Parliament or the European Union—or will it just wither on the vine? The House deserves to hear the Government's thoughts. Many people are concerned, and many employees—considerable manpower is involved—deserve to know where their future lies.

How is it envisaged that the new initiative will operate as far as the United Nations is concerned? It is expected to be a means of rapid reaction. If that signifies anything, the words themselves define it: its function will be to respond rapidly to sudden instances of major unrest or revolt, or sudden conflict. Will the force mark time until politicians have secured general agreement—whether in Brussels, or from the United Nations in New York—that it may proceed? What if a veto is introduced, to turn rapid reaction into no reaction at all? Does not the very existence of the triumvirate of France, Germany and Great Britain lead one to suspect that the agreed political decisions will be made by those three powers, probably with the acquiescence of the United States—and that all that will be necessary just to launch the rapid reaction force? Moreover, when it has been launched, the nations Prime Ministers will have to consider how to get their action endorsed by the United Nations. Is that really how control of the rapid reaction force will operate? We have not been told, and I think that we need to be told before we go much further.

Publicly, Russia has strongly opposed, and still opposes, the enlargement of NATO. Rightly or wrongly, it sees that enlargement as a major threat to its borders, to its influence, and to the safety of the motherland. Let us be under no misapprehension: although Russia may move towards working for friendship with certain nations of the west, at no time will the objective be other than to regain its position as a major power to equal, or combat, the influence of the United States.

Russia will wish to weaken NATO. It will seek, by subterfuge of one sort or another, to acquire the most up-to-date technology and knowledge of modern

[Sir Peter Emery]

weaponry, contrary to the wishes of the west and the manufacturing companies that have been spied on or defrauded of their property. We need only read the papers published recently by Mr. Mitrokhin to know that Russia has constantly tried to obtain secrets about confidential manufacturing plans through subversion and spying. That is going on even today.

However, while we know that it is going on, surely we need to find ways of ensuring that Russia can be enticed into working with us to defuse potential difficulties. It is possible to work—somewhat—together to enhance democratic institutions and the protection of human rights. That is not always the case, but we must strive to ensure that it happens more often. Russia's role in Yugoslavia, and in the Kosovo crisis, illustrates the need. But we must also obtain a positive policy from Government—a policy that Russia can understand, that is not contrary to the views of our close allies, and that can be increasingly understood and, we hope, enhanced by Russia.

The parliamentary assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe may well be used to that end. The three "baskets" working in the OSCE are represented by the assembly's three Committees—on Political Affairs and Security, on Economic Affairs, Environment and Science, and on Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions.

The Russian delegations have made no secret of the fact that they do not want the first Committee, in considering security, to interpret "security" as merely domestic or internal security, as it does now. They want its remit widened, so that it can consider defence matters. Would it be possible to extend the remit somewhat without turning part of the OSCE into an anti-NATO structure? Should we not be considering that? After all, Russia sees the OSCE in an entirely different light, given that it is a founder member, rather than being invited as a supplicant to the NATO assembly or the Council of Europe.

Could not "security" be extended to the safeguarding of existing national borders? That could well stand a chance of overcoming the Russian aversion to NATO. Is it too absurd to consider Russia's being able, whenever it wished, to opt into a rapid reaction force against revolution or military unrest? After all, we are working with Russia in Bosnia and Kosovo. Could not areas of mutual defence become the leading edge of closer Russian co-operation with the west? Such thinking is not too advanced or too lateral. We need to strengthen, not weaken, our relations with the "Great Bear" while we still understand what that nation can be up to.

My remarks have entailed a vast number of questions and a few original ideas. Will the Minister, in winding up, please give the House detailed answers on the European defence initiative involving the French and German commitments to finance and obtain the heavy lift capability necessary for the forces of the European defence initiative? What will be the necessary increase in British manpower to ensure that our commitments can be met without depleting existing commitments? What is the future of the WEU assembly? What is the Government's view of the new thinking on Russia's role in the OSCE? If I receive some answers to those questions, this debate will have been worth while.

7.21 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I fear that I shall not be the last hon. Member to apologise for not attending tomorrow's debate. I am afraid that I have a long-standing constituency engagement, for which I had requested leave to attend assuming that we would be on a three-line whip. I now discover that the debate arises on a motion for the Adjournment, but nevertheless, I fear that I shall not be in the Chamber for tomorrow's debate.

I shall first deal with the various parts of the world about which questions need to be asked. My hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) referred to Sierra Leone. On Monday, the Defence Secretary said that our presence in Sierra Leone was intended purely for training, and the Minister will support that view. However, our presence in Sierra Leone is at least questionable. Of course we wish a legitimate Government to be supported in Sierra Leone, but there are failures in the Government's policy.

The so-called ethical foreign policy led to the abandonment of Commissioner Penfold's proposals to support President Kabbah in 1998, because of which enormous numbers of people have had their limbs lopped off or have been killed as a result of the Revolutionary United Front's activities. We seem to be sitting in Sierra Leone without a clear purpose for our being there. We are training its armed forces, but there are question marks about some of the people that we are training. I fear that we are becoming a sitting duck.

If the British armed forces, with United Nations support, wish to defeat the RUF, perhaps they should do so. I might support that, but we now have people sitting there with no clear purpose. Training is not enough, because there is no evidence that training the Sierra Leonean armed forces will lead to their victory over the various rebel groups. The Minister should tell the House—and, indeed, the people of this country and the armed forces—how many troops are expected to remain in Sierra Leone and for how long. On Monday, we heard that a task force will visit the area in the near future.

Our policy in Zimbabwe is closely linked to that in Sierra Leone. We were told on Monday that we had to support the Government of Sierra Leone—a friendly Commonwealth country. We are supporting the Government of Zimbabwe with a British Army training team. Although it is a regional team, it is based in Harare and has trained the Zimbabwean army. The Zimbabwean army is mostly not evicting white farmers, many of whom may have British nationality, from their farms; it is not beating up people on the white farms. There have been dreadful cases of black workers being burnt alive and the like. It is actually fighting in the Congo, supporting the misguided—to put it mildly—policies of the Zimbabwean Government and lining the pockets of various senior members of the Zimbabwean Administration. It cannot be right that British Army personnel are seen to support—irrespective of whether they actually do so—the Zimbabwean Administration, which have, frankly, put themselves beyond the pale.

The situation in Bosnia is closely linked to my previous point about Sierra Leone. I am well aware that the position in Bosnia and the Balkans is extremely complicated, but we first sent troops into Bosnia in November 1992—now eight years ago—when the situation was ghastly and it has been very confused ever

since. We have sent troops into Kosovo, but the British Army and the rest of the armed forces, which are heavily overstretched, need to know how long that commitment will last. Is it open-ended? It was not in 1992, but I fully accept that that was under the previous Administration. If it is not open-ended, when will it end?

There have been tremendous changes in the Balkans, including elections in Serbia and Croatia and, indeed, in Kosovo over the weekend, but we must consider how long to keep British troops in those places when they are often not doing quite as much good as they might be. I pay tribute to all those working there, but it must be depressing for those who were there in 1992 to return in 2000. They must wonder what has been achieved by keeping British forces there—a lot of good, of course, but the situation remains difficult. We owe it to our soldiers to say how long we expect them to remain in those areas and until which conditions prevail.

Another part of the world which I should like to mention is Belize, which I know well because I spent six months there during the Falklands crisis. We used to have a battalion there. The previous Government, as I am sure that the Minister will remind us, withdrew the battalion, much to the consternation of the Belizean Government. I recently met the Belizean high commissioner and also the Belizean Prime Minister when he visited the House in the summer. They are concerned about the support that the British Government will give to the territorial integrity of Belize. There used to be no doubt about that; we kept forces there to guarantee its territorial integrity. I understand that that guarantee has lapsed. If it has not, and if we will guarantee its territorial integrity with armed force, I should be grateful if the Minister would say so. That is a serious point. I understand that it is also a matter for the Foreign Office, but the Belizean Government are concerned about the matter of armed support.

The Guatemalan Government claim part of Belize for historic reasons with which we have never agreed. They used to claim it all, but they now only want part of it. We owe Belize—a former colony and member of the Commonwealth—our support. We should say that we will back up the Belizean Government if necessary, because the threat of backing them up has worked in the past against the Guatemalans. I do not know what the Guatemalan Government are like now, but its Governments tend to be unstable. I was in the area during the Falklands crisis and know that the Guatemalan Government were pretty unpleasant. When the Falklands were invaded in 1982, a lot of sabre rattling went on in Guatemala. Its Government said that they would invade Belize and there were demonstrations in the streets. When the task force sailed, everything went quiet. When the task force landed and succeeded, the Guatemalans went away quietly and did not bother us for the rest of my stay in Belize.

I should like to deal with the state of the armed forces. As always, we have heard tributes to the excellent armed forces personnel. Of course, I should like to reinforce those tributes, but I regularly speak to friends, past colleagues, in the armed forces and I can assure hon. Members that they feel rather beleaguered. My first point is about recruitment. The Minister will confirm that the Army is 6,000 personnel under strength. I understand that, according to *Jane's* defence publications, an army is defined as trained force more than 100,000 strong. Perhaps the Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but the Army has now dropped below that strength and, therefore, is technically seen as a defence force.

Although it is a serious problem throughout the armed forces, I should like to home in on Army officer recruitment. Earlier this year, the Minister announced that the target figure of 770 officer cadets had not been met and only 646 officer cadets entered Sandhurst, and that the passing out target figure of 620 trained officers had not been met and only 534 passed out in the previous financial year. If that is the case, that will, as the Minister will know, have a long-term knock-on consequence, which he and, indeed, the Government need to address.

We need to look at why that is so, and one reason among many is pay. I am not arguing for an increase in pay for the armed forces, although I am sure that it would be welcome and I would be delighted to support such an increase if it came along.

Mr. Spellar: Another spending commitment.

Mr. Robathan: I am not arguing for that, as I said.

We need to realise that young men and women do not join the armed forces for financial reward, but they expect financial remuneration—that is fair enough, for heaven's sake. A graduate joining the Army now would get £21,000 a year, which is not bad for a person straight out of university. However, eight to 10 years later, as a captain, he would earn only about £31,000 a year. That is not bad pay either, but, if we want high quality people in the Army and the rest of the armed forces, we need to consider how to reward them.

I know many people in their early 20s who are earning considerably more in the professions and the City. Perhaps one might say that the City distorts the job market—I might applaud that, but those employed in it are certainly earning a lot of money. The pool of high quality people coming out of university and going into the armed forces is shrinking and part of the reason is pay. I know of various instances of that, and people to whom I have spoken have said that the rewards were so great outside the armed forces that they went elsewhere instead.

A greater part of the problem with recruitment and, particularly perhaps, retention is the political correctness of Government policy. I have mentioned it before. I know that there will be hoots of derision from the Minister—indeed, here comes one.

Mr. Spellar: Garbage.

Mr. Robathan: Perhaps instead of wandering around not listening to what members of the armed forces say when he visits establishments—I know that he does wander around and visit them—he should listen carefully to what they say and try to engage them in conversation. He should not expect them to do the great old military thing and to say, "Yes, Sir." Many of them are willing to talk.

A gradual erosion, a gradual undermining, of the armed forces ethos is contributing to people leaving the services. Again, I know that to be true. I accept that the sky will not fall in because of the new policy on homosexuals in the armed forces—there have always been homosexuals in the armed forces. That is not the point. The point is that, gradually, the whole ethos of the forces is being undermined.

[Mr. Robathan]

I should like the Minister to comment on and to reaffirm what the Secretary of State for Defence said:

homosexual couples will not have rights or access to service quarters because they will not be married and will not therefore be treated any differently from other unmarried couples.—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 297.]

It is quite straightforward—until one reads *The Sunday Times* from last weekend:

Army welcomes boyfriend of openly gay officer.

The boyfriend of the first openly gay officer in the Royal Navy has been accepted as the equivalent of a naval wife.

I do not believe everything that I read in the newspapers, but it would be helpful if the Minister responded to that report.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): I must reinforce what my hon. Friend says. The Army has changed the name of its quarters. We no longer have Army married quarters; we have Army families accommodation.

Mr. Robathan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. That underlines the point that we are moving in a direction that causes concerns to many people. I freely admit that the sky will not fall in as a result of those changes, but they are undermining the purpose and existence of the armed forces.

Much more important than the question of homosexuals within the armed forces, the argument over which has been lost and given away, is the report in *The Mail on Sunday*—I am sure that the Minister saw it—which said:

Defence chief under siege by Colonel Muppet.

which I thought was a rather rude comment. The article refers, however, to a serious point. The Minister says "Garbage" about what I might say, but he should comment on the words of the supporter of the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Guthrie. He was quoted as saying; these quotes have a terrible tendency to be incredibly accurate, as the Minister is aware:

He—

Guthrie—

believes that the erosion of the effectiveness of the armed forces for political reasons is the biggest crisis facing the military. He fears he is being driven down the road of having to accept women and the disabled in every position.

His job is to deliver a fighting force made up of people who have to kill or be killed and not worry about the comrade on either side who can't really cope. He can't do that if politicians take control from military chiefs in deciding who is allowed to serve.

If the Minister says that that is complete garbage—again, to use his own term—or if he is, like the Secretary of State, about to say that senior military officers make their own decisions and have no political pressure put on them, I look forward to hearing that.

The crux is the physical abilities of men and women and whether allowing women on the front line and in the infantry would lower standards. It must inevitably be a somewhat subjective judgment, but I assure the Minister that any such decision would also contribute to undermining the ability of the infantry to do its task because it would fundamentally alter its capabilities. Members of the infantry are not misogynists—no more than me, I should say—but we do not want the point, the standards and purpose of the armed forces to be undermined.

The problem is that we have forgotten in this place and perhaps throughout too much of society what real war is about. We should ask our fathers generation. I believe that I am right in saying that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) served during the war. There are very few here who did, but may I refer the Minister to the obituaries in many newspapers, particularly *The Daily Telegraph*—which I read, although he may not be such an avid reader of it—of the second world war generation, which is disappearing? It is important to understand what that generation saw and what happened to them. It was not some nice peace time parade ground.

Mr. Spellar: I will come to the main part of the hon. Gentleman's case when I reply, but may I pose the question: does he think that the surface fleet is no longer effective?

Mr. Robathan: As I said, the sky will not fall in because of the proposed changes—it is a gradual process. I suggest that he talks to people in the surface fleet who practise fire-fighting drills, as I have done. Perhaps they will tell him the answer, as they told me, or perhaps they will be a bit more deferential. Perhaps if he talks to them for long enough he will discover the facts. They say that, when they practise fire-fighting drills—he will know that they have to close bulkheads and whatever and drag bodies—it is very difficult because it is strong physical work. Unfortunately, many of the excellent women who are serving on royal naval ships are not able to do that strong, physical work, so the men have to come to the fore. That is fact. It is not my fantasy. It is self-evident and common sense.

As we pursue the agenda that is alleged in the newspapers of putting women on the front line, we should consider the Israeli experiment. The Israelis, as I understand it, are moving away from having women on the front line because of all the problems, which have been explained, but particularly because there is enormous difficulty with the strength and physical capabilities of women. It is not misogynistic to say so; it is self-evident. Women tend to be frailer, perhaps to be smaller in physical stature and to be less strong than men. That is not a criticism. It is a fact, which is why we have Olympic men's sports and women's sports. It is pretty straightforward.

The problem is not just that we have forgotten what real war is about, but that far too many Members on the Government Benches see the armed forces almost as an affront to so-called modernising Britain. They see the armed forces as the forces of conservatism, to coin a phrase—old fashioned, elitist and traditional. They are old fashioned, elitist and traditional, and they are the envy of the world. It is not just that they dress up in red coats—they are chinless wonders, to coin another phrase—although they do, are very good at it and are much admired throughout the world in terms of ceremonial duties. It is not just that they are excellent peacekeepers and admired in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Bosnia—wherever one would like to mention—although they are very good at that, too. They are there to defend this country. That is their primary purpose, which is old fashioned and traditional.

The fact is that soldiers in the infantry have to kill with bayonets. They have to kill or be killed. Bayonet drill is still undertaken. I do not know how many Government Members have tried it, but it is pretty unpleasant. Indeed, if one thinks about its purpose, it is extremely unpleasant—as is being blown up. One needs to read the obituaries of people whose friends were blown up all around them and survived the most desperate deprivations during the second world war to understand what real war is about. God willing, we shall never return to that, but we must accept that one day we may, which is why we have armed forces.

Many of my former colleagues, some of whom have recently left the Army, say that the Human Rights Act 1998 has undermined discipline. Discipline is a tremendous strength of the armed forces, and is one reason why we are so admired by fellow European countries. However, it is under threat from the Human Rights Act, the introduction of which is not sustainable in war or operations. In peace time, when the Army is in barracks, the Human Rights Act does not matter that much, but it will matter if we go to war. For instance, a commanding officer used to be able to lock someone up. As the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) said, there was always a right of redress if things went wrong.

The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but a commanding officer is now allowed to keep someone in custody for more than 48 hours only if he has a decision from a judicial officer. That has not happened very often, but I shall give an example of when it has. In Germany, a commanding officer found a drug dealer—not a user—peddling drugs in the barracks, and locked him up and put him in custody prior to trial by court martial or, if necessary, the civil authority. After 48 hours, a decision from the judicial officer was needed. Although it is hearsay, as I have not spoken to the people involved, the drug dealer was released by the judicial officer. He was not just confined to barracks, but was released and was able to go home. That is bizarre, especially as it is unlikely that that would have happened in a civilian court. The Minister may correct me on the details, which I have on hearsay. However, it is worrying that such hearsay is doing the rounds of the Army. What message does that send about discipline? It sends the message that justice is not being served. Discipline matters in peace, but is essential in war. Before the Minister rubbishes me on the matter of the Human Rights Act, perhaps he will tell me what representations, if any, he has had from the armed forces.

My penultimate point is a minor one that was made in Defence questions on Monday, and concerns the possible use of Army drivers in any subsequent fuel crisis. Of course, it is the Government's right to use Government servants as they wish in the pursuit of their policy. However, about 80 per cent. of the British public consider that the fuel protesters have a point, which is in contrast to past strikes, such as the firemen's strike, when drivers from the armed forces were used. I do not criticise the Government for wanting to use the armed forces, but they should be wary. Many of us would be saddened if, by using Army or other forces drivers, the Government put the armed forces in confrontation with the public. The armed forces in this country have not been in that position for many years and on those occasions when they were, such as at Peterloo, have gone down in history.

Finally, Remembrance day is soon, and most Members are wearing poppies. We owe it to all those whom we will remember, honour and respect a week on Sunday to ensure that we do not let our guard in the Army and armed forces drop.

7.43 pm

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth): It is a pleasure to take part in our debate, and especially to follow the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), an ex-service man who brings with him experience, and recent news and information.

I looked at the section on procurement in the review, in relation to which my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) brought up the subject of industry. I am pleased that smart procurement is projected to save us billions of pounds, as we need that money to spend elsewhere. I am also pleased that we are going to provide equipment for our armed forces, as they deserve the best equipment that money can buy. I have said for years that I never want to be in the position of knocking at a door and telling parents that their son or daughter has been lost because we asked him or her to do a job, but did not provide the right equipment. It is our duty to provide the forces with the right equipment. Tanks, attack helicopters and frigates are vital to fight a war, but the best piece of equipment that we have in any peacekeeping role is a professionally trained soldier with a rifle, which, very often, has a bayonet fixed on the end.

How often have soldiers been in situations of conflict in which people know that they can have confidence in them? Unfortunately, although we have increased the number of soldiers by 3,500, that increase is only on paper, because, as the hon. Member for Blaby said, the numbers are short, there are gaps in the ranks and we are finding it difficult to recruit. I do not follow the hon. Gentleman's line on why recruiting is difficult; I see a different scenario. I used to have a barracks in my constituency, but a boundary change meant that I lost it. Before that happened, I dealt with several cases at the barracks involving families who were leaving the Army because of the redundancies that resulted from the previous Government's cuts. Those people were in married quarters, and to get housed, they had to be evicted. The last piece of paper that the Army gave them was a bill for court costs of £134. Some of them had served in the Army for 13 or 15 years, but left with a bitter taste in their mouths. How could they recommend a career in the forces?

I am of the generation that was the last to do national service. My son and his family have no connection at all with the military; there is a generation today that cannot pass on any information about what a life in the military is like to their children who may be considering that avenue. Army recruiting teams have had a difficult time getting into schools.

I welcome the improved welfare conditions that the Government have introduced, including common leave allowance, which means that all ranks get 30 days, and guaranteed post-operational leave, which is vital and means that personnel can go back to their families and re-establish links. The Government have also improved the separated service allowance and personnel can get £2,000, although to qualify they have to spend any 365 days in a two-year period away from their families. However, they will get two

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bonuses for the price of one. There are also more free telephone calls—personnel get 20 minutes a week instead of three. There are more flexible concessionary travel entitlements, better pay, better access to dentists and, as a result of the £140 million, better access to medical treatment. We are starting to reverse the decline in the employment of doctors and nurses that the previous Government imposed.

We have also established a veterans advice unit, so when our veterans leave the Army they are guided back into civilian life.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) said, the Government are investigating Gulf war veterans illness, and have doubled the money spent on it, but we have not dealt with the case of the nuclear test veterans. The American, Australian and Canadian Governments, who are our allies, looked after their nuclear test veterans while they were on active service, but we have yet to look after ours. I hope that the Government will reconsider their position on the issue, which needs to be worked on.

Personnel are a vital part of our military force. People who go into the Army are trained to become professional soldiers. More than that, however, the Army is a modern operational force and, although not many people know it, young people can be trained and gain qualifications that are acceptable in civilian life. They come out with nationally recognised qualifications of the highest level. Very few employers, schools or colleges know that, but we should point it out to them. I am afraid that we have distanced ourselves from our forces.

Much of today's debate has dwelt on Britain's role in NATO and in Europe. Although I do not want to repeat other hon. Members' speeches, I hope that Ministers will keep one thing in mind. As we know, NATO was formed at the end of the second world war to deal with contemporary conditions, and its defensive forces were established to meet a common enemy and to fight on Europe's level plains. We saw just how difficult it was to fight on different terrain in Kosovo.

We, and our allies in Europe, have to stand on our own two feet. Anyone who has read Governor Bush's comments will have no doubt that if he is successful in the presidential election, he will remove American forces from Kosovo and then start to withdraw American funding for Europe's defence. He believes that Europe should pay more for its own defence. Our European allies will have to face up to the fact that defence does not come cheap, and start to match Britain's defence contributions. However, if we are going to work effectively with our allies, it is no use duplicating one another's efforts; we have to try to co-ordinate those efforts.

There may also come a time when we have to act only in Europe's interests, which may not coincide with America's interests. We can never be seen simply as America's poodle.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that our interests may not always coincide with those of America. However, is he absolutely confident that our interests will always coincide with those of our European partners?

Mr. Jenkins: I have never been absolutely confident about anything in the future—I never say never, and I try never to say no. There will of course be occasions on which we may have differences with other European Union member states. We would have extreme difficulties if a European army were established and the decision were made to send it into a member state. I therefore do not believe that a European army will be established.

I think it is likely that the forces of European Union member states will be combined to participate in agreed operations. However, the command structure for the combined EU forces will be totally different from that used by NATO. As hon. Members will be aware, when NATO was established we handed sovereignty over our forces to NATO supreme command, which does not ask us before telling our troops to go.

Dr. Julian Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is describing a hoary old myth that is always brought up in the context of European security and defence. In NATO, however, we always have the option of withdrawing at any moment, whereas we would not have such an option in a common European security and defence policy, if there ever is one.

Mr. Jenkins: I will not belabour the point. Hon. Members should simply read a history of NATO and ask themselves what would have happened if the Russians had attacked. We would not have had a chance to withdraw.

Flexibility is the only indispensable requirement in a changing world. I ask Ministers to work with our partners and to get the best deal for Britain. I wish them good luck in that, because our forces will be facing many difficult challenges. We can also be sure that they will be facing many uncertainties, because of "Events, dear boy. Events."

7.53 pm

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): The Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence asked Committee members speaking in this debate to offer his apologies for not attending the debate. He is representing us elsewhere today, at one of the European organisations, and regrets that he cannot attend.

I support the views expressed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) on the Chinook crash in the Mull of Kintyre. I have asked many questions about the crash, and I genuinely believe that the initial investigation and the subsequent review of the accident, because of the way in which they were conducted, have failed miserably to deliver justice to the two pilots of the aircraft and to their families.

It is a real stain on the reputation of the Royal Air Force and of the Ministry of Defence that more action has not been taken to correct that failure. As my right hon. and learned Friend said, a large groundswell of opinion in this place favours such action, and hon. Members on both sides of the House are asking and pleading for justice to be delivered at long last to those two RAF officers. I do not think that that is too much to ask for.

There is sufficient evidence just about the FADEC system—FADEC stands for fully automated digital electronic control—and on contamination in the aircraft's other systems to lead most reasonable people to believe that there should be another inquiry. I believe that such an inquiry would vindicate the belief that the two pilots

did all they could to secure the safety of that aircraft and to ensure that it stayed in the air, and that they did nothing to contribute to the disaster.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Does he agree that Royal Air Force regulations maintain that a finding of negligence should be made only when there is no doubt about it whatsoever? Does not a finding of pilot error in the case in question fly in the face of the RAF's own regulations?

Mr. Hancock: I welcome that intervention. It is a pity that the Ministry of Defence has not listened to that point, which has been made time and again by hon. Members and by others. Perhaps it is the MOD's failure to heed it that has led some people to believe that there is another motive behind the finding.

There is no evidence or justification for finding those two men guilty of negligence or of operating the aircraft in a manner that caused it to crash. There is no evidence to support such a claim, and it is pitiful and regrettable that more action has not been taken. I hope that the Secretary of State will order another review and a reopening of the case.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): People in Northern Ireland entirely support the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, particularly when we think of the millions that are being spent on raking over the events of so-called Bloody Sunday. Tragically, we lost some of the finest brains in security in that crash. Although the crash is being blamed on pilot error, it is obvious that there were other problems.

Mr. Hancock: I appreciate that supportive intervention. I also hope that the Secretary of State realises that there is a real debt to be paid to those two young officers and to their families. I congratulate their families on the determination that they have shown in continuing this fight.

I am sorry that the Minister has left the Chamber, because I should like to address the issue of the evidence given today to the Defence Committee by Air Marshal Sir John Day. I was at the sitting and took part in questioning the air marshal—who was preceded by his well merited reputation as a straight-talking, straightforward senior officer.

I think that the air marshal was unaware of what awaited him at the sitting. However, when he was asked whether he himself instigated the article that appeared last week in *The Sunday Times*, or whether he was asked or told to do it, he made it clear that he was asked. He was not suggesting that he was asked by *The Sunday Times* to do the article. He was suggesting that someone in the Ministry of Defence asked him to do it.

The appalling thing is that the air marshal, in his evidence to the Committee today, said that the article was inaccurate and misrepresented his views. However, various statements in the article are in quotes and are directly attributed to him. Today he claimed that those statements were wrong and that the primary conclusion of the article—that British troops were within hours of invading Kosovo—also was wrong.

Three days have elapsed since the article appeared. Today, however, when the Committee Chairman rightly asked the air marshal something along the lines of "Have you or anyone in the Ministry of Defence sought to take action to put right that article?", his answer was "No". I find that rather surprising.

What was the motive behind the request for the article? Did the Ministry of Defence so dislike the truthful approach of the Defence Committee's report on Kosovo? Was the Ministry so ashamed of the report, which had been brought into the public domain even before the Government had given an appropriate response? We are talking not about an officer serving on the front line or on a base somewhere in Europe, but about someone who works within metres of this Parliament and who regularly gives evidence to the Committee that he was condemning. He went to the press and openly criticised the democratic process that this House holds so precious.

Mr. Spellar: Before the hon. Gentleman winds himself up into a paroxysm of self-righteousness, is not it the case that many of the press reports were so inaccurate and biased that the Chairman of the Select Committee wrote to correct one of the newspapers?

Mr. Hancock: That is an entirely different issue. We are talking not about what the press made of the Defence Committee's report, but about what the Ministry of Defence and senior officers made of it. One of the criticisms was:

> None of that courage is recognised in this report.

However, as the Committee Chairman and other members have made clear, the report lists numerous examples of how our forces repeatedly risked their lives. It says:

> UK pilots and other aircrew and support staff discharged their mission with distinction . . . Overall, despite the heroic efforts of UK aircrew and support staff, we must conclude that the UK's contribution to the air campaign in terms of actual firepower rather than support, was somewhat disappointing.

Even when we were talking about what our forces could not achieve, we were praising them for making the effort on our behalf. The Minister and the Secretary of State have done a great disservice to the democratic process of the House and to the work of the Defence Committee.

Mr. Spellar: Is not it the case that the press reports arising from the Select Committee report did not take a balanced approach? The hon. Gentleman is right—those phrases are contained within the report. However, I am not sure whether they are all contained within the summary—which may have leaned a little the other way—or the press release. Did not many of the press reports lean towards the critical side? Is not that exactly what Air Marshal Day indicated he was trying to correct?

Mr. Hancock: If only that had been conveyed in the article. There is not a single sentence within it that contains any such sentiment. Like other members of the Committee, I feel that the Ministry of Defence and the Secretary of State should respond in the near future to the issues raised today.

I congratulate, thank and admire enormously the men and women who serve in our armed forces. We ask so much of them and they ask so little of us in return—decent equipment to do their job, decent pay and some effort to ensure that their families are looked after when

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they are away. They are undoubtedly our greatest asset. Eurofighter might be a super plane, but it is not a super plane unless a super pilot—male or female—is flying it.

I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) is not here. He spoke so critically about the role of women in our armed forces, but I must remind him that in one of the front-line squadrons flying missions over Iraq a woman was flying one of those planes, and doing a great job. She was not "undermining"; she was making a magnificent effort. Many of the ground crews who look after those aircraft on the front line are managed and controlled by women in senior positions in the RAF, and they do an excellent job. Many of our ships at sea are undermanned, but many specific jobs on them are being done by women. If women were not there, those ships would be even more severely undermanned. It would be a blow to the defence of this country if we took the line taken by the hon. Member for Blaby.

The Defence Committee's Kosovo report is a balanced effort to look at the good, the bad and the ugly of the campaign. There were major lessons to be learned; whether they will be remains to be seen. One of the biggest failures was the failure of the intelligence community to deliver what was expected of them to enable our troops, airmen and sailors to be effective.

It is right that the equipment used should be criticised and brought to the attention of Ministers, and Ministers are right to say that many of the defects were the direct responsibility of previous Governments. However, the Government have been in office for three and a half years, and some of the issues should have been addressed. During the first debate on defence procurement under the Labour Government, we talked about that year's National Audit Office report. Ministers said, "Of course, we are talking about issues that we have inherited. Things will change." Things had not changed much by the time the last report, covering 1999–2000, was written. After two years of the Labour Government, the cost of 25 projects had increased from £34.8 billion to £37.6 billion—£3.2 billion over their original budget. Many of the projects had been delayed for more than four years.

I welcomed the Secretary of State's comments on the commitment of the Royal Navy and the ships. I had hoped to ask him whether he felt that we asked too much of the Royal Navy and whether our commitments were so thinly spread that many of our sailors—men and women—were doing back-to-back long sea deployments, putting a great deal of stress both on them as professionals and on their families. I wanted to know whether ships on active service in the Adriatic, the Gulf or off the shores of Sierra Leone were seriously undermanned. The Minister should tell us whether any of the ships actively deployed today are undermanned by more than 5 per cent.

There is a serious crewing problem on HMS Ocean, and naval officers and ratings who have served on the ship feel that it is undermanned. If Ocean's crew is one short, that seriously undermines the functioning of the ship. We have to look at what we expect from the Navy. HMS Ocean is a classic example of how cutting corners to save costs will, in the long run, cause great heartache to the Royal Navy, the men and women who serve in it and the Royal Marines who embark on its ships. I hope that we do not duplicate the problems of Ocean when we build the second ship.

Many Members have referred to Army accommodation in Bosnia and Kosovo, but what about the accommodation for single soldiers in Aldershot? It is appalling. The Committee was told that it would take more than 10 years to put the shared accommodation for soldiers serving in the British Army in this country into good order.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. He will know that I asked the Secretary of State a question about the accommodation for our troops in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Having inspected Bourlon barracks in Catterick—the regiment's home barracks—I was appalled that in the new millennium, we expect soldiers to live in those conditions and to stay in the Army. How is the Army supposed to recruit new people? Something needs to be done, and should have been done years ago.

Mr. Hancock: I agree entirely. *[Interruption.]* The Minister, from a sedentary position, is blaming the Tories. Of course they are partly responsible. However, the Government have had three and a half years, and we were told by the adjutant-general today that it would take 10 years to put right the accommodation in Aldershot alone, let alone Catterick. Navy accommodation in Portsmouth still causes problems for single sailors living in barracks when they are not on board ship.

The Army has a number of problems to do with the accommodation that soldiers are expected to live in at home and abroad. The RAF has the continuing problem of keeping its pilots together. It was suggested today to Defence Committee members that senior pilots who leave the RAF will be brought back as civilian instructors for two days a week, while employed elsewhere. That is how desperate we are for front-line pilots. Those issues are serious and must be addressed.

We are taking on long-term commitments in the Balkans. No one with any knowledge of the Balkans, and no one who has visited the area in the past five years, would suggest that the Bosnian situation will get any better soon. I have been there recently, and I suggest that improvement is a generation away at least. *[Interruption.]* It will take longer than 10 years, sadly. It needs a new generation of people who have grown up together and are prepared to work together.

At present, there is no interface between the communities. What exists is purely artificial. There is no cross-fertilisation of industry and investment, education and culture. Everything that is there is artificial, and things are held in check simply by the presence of an enormous number of soldiers, many from the United Kingdom.

The situation in Kosovo is much the same. Sadly, I do not share the views of the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith). I am not optimistic that the election has moved us in the right direction. I have spoken to Kosovars who fought for the UCK—the Kosovo Liberation Army—and still believe that they are on active service. They will not relinquish their campaign until they have a free Kosovo. I fear that they have used the result of the election as a referendum on an independent state in Kosovo. They have put down a marker to that effect. Many of the Kosovars living in the United Kingdom—I have many in my constituency—believe that too. None of them would willingly return to Kosovo until it is a

free independent state, not simply an add-on to Serbia or Montenegro. Yet no politicians in this country, and very few in Europe, have cautioned the Kosovars about the way in which they have misinterpreted the election.

The situation in Montenegro is very volatile and open to all sorts of abuses by the President, who will, I am sure, make his move to free his country from the yoke of Serbia. I do not believe that his long-term interests, or those of his country, are linked to Serbia. So we have long-term commitments in the Balkans, which puts stress on the men and women who serve there and on the resources of this country.

As for the European defence identity initiative, I do not believe that the Prime Minister's vision was clear when it came to St. Malo. He has since then hedged his bets one way and then the other in his journey to other European capitals, trying to sell that concept. I have not heard Lord Robertson give a clear indication of how he sees NATO's role in the future with a European defence initiative. I have listened to him on nearly a dozen occasions since he became Secretary-General of NATO. I have listened to European Union politicians and commissioners talk about it. I have listened to Mr. Solana talk about it. They are unclear about their role and about the political dimension.

Some hon. Members, myself included, have views about whether a European rapid reaction force is a feasible proposition. Some have talked about Britain, France and Germany joining together. I am not sure whether the Germans could provide 10,000 men for any long-term deployment. I am certain that most of the other European countries in NATO could not produce anything like that number of personnel for any length of time. Norway, for example, cannot deploy any service men unless they volunteer to go. No service men from Norway who serve in the Balkans are there for any other reason.

Other countries have conscription that lasts for less than a year. So how can countries reasonably be expected to play an active part in a rapid reaction force of 60,000 men if some of them will not even have trained people with the necessary skills to be part of that operation?

Mr. Keetch: Although it is true that conscription in some countries is for less than a year, that is not to say that their armed forces are wholly manned by conscripts. Some forces from those countries consist of professional soldiers who could be equipped in those circumstances.

Mr. Hancock: Yes, of course, but they are the same troops who serve on behalf of their countries in Bosnia and Kosovo. They cannot be in three places. Unlike the United Kingdom, those countries do not have the resources to deploy 1,000 men in three different locations. The problem has not been thought through.

The Defence Committee report produced an interesting graph about the make-up of countries in NATO and the EU regarding the single defence initiative. It shows the countries in the EU but not in NATO, those in NATO but not in the EU, and those that have a policy of non-intervention. However, the rules are that unless all 15 countries sign up to a European initiative from the EU, they cannot act as a European force. Any one has a veto, but at least three—possibly four—will never put troops into any such action force. They have the right of veto but they do not under any circumstances intend to participate. How can it possibly work when countries such as Turkey, which would commit themselves to troops—and have done so—are not allowed round the table? These questions have not been answered.

The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) talked about the future of the Western European Union parliamentary assembly. Many hon. Members have raised that point time and again to the Prime Minister, to two Secretaries of State for Defence and to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. They have simply been told, "We don't know the answer." However, a European defence identity has to have parliamentary scrutiny. The EU and the European Parliament cannot provide it because that would mean a major amendment to the treaty of Rome, to which some countries would not agree. We have to create oversight at parliamentary level. Yet Ministers have given no indication of where that will come from. We need answers to those questions.

Let me say in conclusion that I, and the other hon. Members who represent constituencies in south Hampshire, are grateful for the good news about the contracts awarded to Vosper Thornycroft for the Royal Navy's new ships. However, the way in which the contract for the second ship is given and agreed is vital. The Secretary of State said that he sticks by what he said, and that there will be an equitable split—50:50—of the work content for that second ship between BAE Systems and Vosper Thornycroft.

I hope that the Secretary of State will insist on that split being agreed, and on the contract being signed sooner rather than later. The contract is good news for shipbuilding in the south of England, and in particular for my constituency, of which the dockyard forms a significant part. It will also safeguard many existing jobs at Vosper Thornycroft. In the long term, it will open up greater potential for shipbuilding at the Portsmouth naval base.

The contract will improve Vosper Thornycroft's potential to build bigger ships, and that is good news. However, that potential will not be fulfilled unless the Secretary of State steps in to bring people together to agree how the contract will be managed and implemented.

My final point concerns service men and their families. I agree with the hon. Members who have asked about married quarters. I have lost count of the number of times that service men and their families have confronted me with the problems that they have experienced with their homes. The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan did not exaggerate when he spoke of the number of moves that his constituent had had to make, nor when he said that the final gift from the armed forces to some service men was a notice to quit their married quarters. Sadly, that happens all too often. We as a nation should be ashamed of that.

I am grateful that from time to time the Ministry of Defence shows a good face to the people who serve it so well, but it is disappointing that so many feel so let down, as they do with regard to accommodation and the treatment of their families.

Two pages in the Royal Navy mission statement presented to the Defence Committee were devoted to communication. There was no mention of the need to communicate with the families of service men, whether they are married or living with partners. I know that the Minister for the Armed Forces has tried, as did his predecessor, to do something to boost family welfare in the armed forces. Significant changes have been made,

[Mr. Hancock]

but they are no means sufficient. More still has to be done: the morale of service men returning home, and the difficulties experienced by their families, remain big problems when it comes to retention of personnel in the armed forces. I hope that the Minister will take seriously the comments that have been made about such matters.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation and respect for those men and women who continue to do their best for the people of this country.

8.22 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): All hon. Members know that the House is marking time, pending the negotiation of legislation in the other place along the Corridor. However, the advantage of that is that this is the second of no fewer than three days of debates on defence issues in one week. The atmosphere for these debates is rather calmer and more relaxed than is sometimes possible, so I make no complaints about the way in which the Government's business managers have afforded hon. Members the opportunity to raise important local issues and to express our concerns—and congratulations, where they are due.

I must apologise to the Minister as, although I will be present for some of the debate tomorrow, I will not be present for the wind-up speeches in the evening. I have an engagement with the Friends of Airborne Forces in Aldershot, and I hope that he will deem that a suitable excuse for absence. I also apologise to my colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench for not being present for most of the opening speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith).

Sadly, my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Aldershot, Sir Julian Critchley, has died since we last debated defence issues in February. It is about 30 years ago this month that he made his maiden speech for the Aldershot constituency, and it concerned a defence White Paper. He was not only extremely amusing and convivial company, but he brought to the House a unique insight into defence issues. He certainly made his mark in that respect, and was a very appropriate man to represent Aldershot.

In addition, since the House last debated defence matters, the Parachute Regiment, which used to be based in Aldershot, has taken part in the operation in Sierra Leone. All hon. Members will agree that it did so with enormous distinction. I have spoken to members of the 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment who were appalled by what they found in Sierra Leone. They were genuinely moved by the appalling mutilation that some young children suffered. I have no doubt that they were keen to get stuck in and deal with the perpetrators of those horrific crimes.

I understand the reservations expressed by my right hon. and hon. Friends about being sucked into an endless commitment in Sierra Leone, as appears to be happening in Bosnia, Kosovo and elsewhere. Such commitments will impact on the availability of our forces if any other crisis emerges, but the countervailing argument is that the action offered the opportunity to undertake some real training and to engage troops in real action in a genuine and worthwhile cause. How long they will remain in Sierra Leone is another matter, but the personnel involved felt that they were doing an important job, underpinned by a strong moral imperative. They were satisfied with the professionalism with which the task was executed, and I think that the House would agree with that assessment.

I had the great pleasure of attending the 1st Battalion's summer ball, which was not cancelled when the battalion left for Sierra Leone. The battalion managed to discharge the functions required of it by Ministers in time for the ball to go ahead as planned on its return. That is entirely appropriate, given the professionalism of our armed forces. The summer ball was great fun: for a moment, I thought that I had been transported to Lungi airport, as a number of signs had either been replicated or had somehow found their way to Aldershot.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: They had been acquired.

Mr. Spellar: Liberated.

Mr. Howarth: That is quite possible.

The general picture of the armed forces has not improved since we last debated the matter. I do not want to be overly party political about that, as the previous Government made their mistakes. However, recruitment is not improving. The Army remains well below strength—more so than when we last debated these matters. The Royal Air Force is short of 100 fast-jet pilots—again, more than at the time of the previous debate. The problems of morale and overstretch are made worse by the fact that it is taking longer to extract troops from engagements overseas. I support the Government's approach to providing expeditionary forces, but the investment, equipment or troops necessary for the Government to achieve their objectives are lacking.

I hope that the House will bear with me when I refer to matters affecting my constituency of Aldershot, given that it has many military facilities. Moreover, Farnborough is the headquarters of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency.

The Minister's visit to Aldershot on 2 August was much appreciated. A meeting was held with representatives of all the political parties, and we were much reassured by the commitment that the Minister gave that Aldershot would continue to play an important part in the deployment of military garrisons around the country. Although project Connaught is under way to evaluate which facilities need improving and which can be disposed of, we were pleased that Aldershot will retain its role.

I had faxed to me today a letter from the Under-Secretary to Councillor Mike Roberts. I gave notice to the Under-Secretary that I intended to refer to the letter, in which he said:

> The shape of the military town itself and the units which reside there may vary, but my Department has no plans to withdraw from Aldershot.

I am keen that the wording should be unambiguous. Far from hearing that there is no intention to withdraw from Aldershot, I would like to hear that the intention is that it should remain one of the four key garrisons in the country. If the Minister of State makes it clear in his reply to the debate that that is what is intended, there will remain no doubt in Aldershot.

Mr. Spellar: I am pleased to do that now.

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to the Minister for that prompt response, which we shall transmit immediately to Aldershot by the most sophisticated means so that my constituents can be reassured.

A number of other decisions are being taken about Aldershot. I give one word of warning to Ministers: if too much land in the Aldershot garrison is released, there will be no slack for expansion in the event, for example, that we need to bring troops back from Germany or elsewhere. I urge the Government not to be too mesmerised by the needs of the Treasury to raise money from the sale of defence estates, in my constituency at any rate, to fund Treasury requirements. To do so would reduce the Aldershot garrison to a small size that would not provide the critical mass that we need.

My next point does not affect my constituency, but I have the express permission of one of my right hon. Friends who has a non-speaking part in this place, namely, the Opposition Chief Whip. He has the Odiham Royal Air Force base in his constituency. It is in our part of north-east Hampshire. The Minister of State kindly wrote to me about plans to move the Chinooks that are stationed at RAF Odiham to Yeovilton in 2004.

I do not want to go into great detail about the advisability or otherwise of ejecting the Fleet air arm from Yeovilton, where it has traditionally been based, or about the difficulties of placing Fleet air arm people on the same site as RAF squadrons. That issue has been well addressed by Captain Leppard from Haslemere in Surrey in a letter in *The Daily Telegraph* of 18 October, which I commend to Ministers. What on earth is the point of moving the Chinooks from Odiham, where they are closely associated with the Army units with which they work and where they are close to Salisbury plain, and sending them miles away to Yeovilton? In order to get to work, they will have to fly a long way to meet up with the Army units with which it is their job to train.

I saw the serious and close co-operation between the Chinooks and Army units when I went on exercise two years ago with the 10th Battalion Parachute Regiment, sadly now deceased as a TA unit. I urge Ministers to look again at the idea of redeploying the Chinooks from Odiham to Yeovilton. A cynic might suggest that land in north-east Hampshire is rich pickings for sale for house-building purposes, and that that might well appeal to the Treasury. However, there is a strong military case for retaining the Chinooks at RAF Odiham. I urge Ministers to think carefully about that. They will have to justify to us the additional cost of flying from Yeovilton to wherever they have to meet up with the Army and the interference in people's lives in areas that they overfly.

Next I should like to discuss the future of DERA—the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. We are keen in the defence business to talk in acronyms. It is known as "derer", not "dearer" because it claims that it gives good value for money. I am concerned about the way in which the proposed public-private partnership is developing. Ministers will know that I and my party have opposed the Government's plans. The headquarters of DERA and its chief executive are located in my constituency, so obviously I am keen that the organisation should flourish and I do not want to stand in the way of its flourishing.

The Government are exacerbating the problem by starving the organisation of funds from central Government, making privatisation the only option to keep the organisation viable. In the past six years, the applied and corporate research budget has fallen by 40 per cent. in real terms and it is now below £500 million, whereas it was about £1,000 million a few years ago. Those cuts are very serious. The amount spent on research as a percentage of the defence procurement budget has been cut from 10 per cent. to 6 per cent. in the United Kingdom, whereas both France and Germany have rising research budgets and in the United States, which has a massive overall defence budget, the research budget has been increased from 8.5 to 10 per cent.

As I said in February, I have great concerns that DERA is in limbo. Ministers have to answer some serious questions. How long will we continue with the process of trying to find a PPP solution? I have received from a constituent a letter that sets out some of the issues. It is from a Mr. Newton, who has worked at DERA for some 19 years. He is an experienced scientist and he now manages and co-ordinates advice in a project support role to one of the flagship integrated project teams at Abbey Wood for the former department of defence procurement, or the Defence Procurement Agency, as I believe it now is.

How will Ministers carve up DERA into the part that will remain in the public sector and deal with the sensitive research carried out jointly with the United States and other allies, and the part that advises Ministers and senior civil servants on procurement issues? The latter part of DERA is to be hived off and sold to the highest bidder in the private sector. As my constituent writes:

according to Sir John Chisholm—

the Chief Executive of DERA—

the relationship between the two organizations needs to be extremely close, with staff continuing to share accommodation and possibly even support facilities. It is indeed likely that a close relationship is required, both for R-DERA—

that is the retained DERA—

to have access to the resources and expertise of NewDERA—

the privatised DERA—

in order to fulfil its functions for MOD, and for NewDERA to retain business dependent on the world class expertise of staff in R-DERA. However, if the relationship were to be that close, would the US be content to continue to collaborate with R-DERA? Would UK industry be willing to share its intellectual property rights with R-DERA without worrying that commercially sensitive material might be passed, even inadvertently, to NewDERA staff? In short, how could R-DERA be a trusted partner for international collaborators, industry and academics if it were still to maintain a close relationship with New-DERA? This issue is far too important to be fudged: it must be faced and resolved before the Secretary of State makes a final decision.

Dr. Julian Lewis: My hon. Friend may be interested to know that it is precisely for such reasons that the Select Committee has been so strongly opposed to what has been happening to DERA.

Mr. Howarth: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me that intelligence from the Select Committee. I am of course aware that the Select Committee called on the Government to abandon their proposals on DERA. I find myself in a difficult position; people in my constituency are trying to make the proposals work, although they are fraught with considerable difficulties.

In addressing some of the divisions between the two parts of the organisation, my constituent, Mr. Newton, touched on the relationship with the United States. When my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and I held a meeting in my constituency recently with representatives from the business community in the defence industries—I do not want to be more specific than

[Mr. Howarth]

that—I was alarmed to find out that they still believed that the Government's proposals were damaging the relationship with the US.

The real difficulty is that we do not know what information the US is no longer sharing with us. The question cannot be asked. However, there is no doubt that representatives of British industry who visit their counterparts in the US are bringing back the information that there is nervousness about the Government's plans. Are the Government planning to introduce a Bill? Do they plan to provide us with a chart showing how they will divide up the organisation? Where will the retained DERA—the continuing public sector operation—be based, while the new DERA, which will ultimately be up for sale, is still based in Farnborough?

Mr. Keetch: The hon. Gentleman touches on a crucial matter. We are told by the Government and by members of the US Administration that there is no problem about DERA privatisation. However, there is an underlying feeling that middle management—the people who actually do the work—may be beginning to lose faith in what the Government are trying to do. Has he gained that impression from talking to people in his constituency? When I talk to people in Malvern, there is a sense that although, at the top, there is an official acceptance that everything might be okay, where the real work is done there are clear concerns.

Mr. Howarth: Yes, there are such concerns. As long ago as May last year, Sir John Chisholm tried to assure his staff that during his trip to the US, he had been able to reassure American opinion—high up in the US Defence Department and in its research establishments. When my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green visited the US last autumn, he found that the Americans were not as reassured as Sir John had implied to his employees and to the rest of us.

Mr. Duncan Smith: It is most interesting that the Government say that they received support from a high level in America. The US will say, however, that it is not its job to interfere directly in the decisions made by a democratically elected Government in the UK. It will state its acceptance because it has to do so, but in practice it does not have to accept what the Government are doing. That is the real point.

Mr. Howarth: Indeed. However, if the Government are intent on taking that route and the decision has been made, I do not want to frustrate or undermine that. None the less, we have a responsibility to draw to the attention of Ministers what people are saying to us. People tell me that they joined DERA because of the ethos. One chap told me, "I joined the organisation because I wanted to do my bit for the country—this was the way I could do it". People did not join to make themselves millionaires. Had they wanted to do that, they would have entered the private sector. Will Ministers tell us how far the proposals for R-DERA and new DERA have advanced?

I draw the attention of Ministers to the closure of the engine test facility at Pyestock—also in Farnborough—in the spring of 2002. They will be aware that I have raised the matter with the Secretary of State over several months. I understand the difficulties faced by Sir John Chisholm; he is losing customers and, once the EJ200 engine for the Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft comes fully into service, there will be no further business for that important test facility. I understand that the facility had its origins in Power Jets Ltd., Sir Frank Whittle's company, which was nationalised by the Labour party in the 1940s—driving Sir Frank Whittle over to the US.

Apart from that side-swipe, there are serious issues to be addressed. I asked Ministers whether we were losing a strategic facility at Pyestock and I was assured that the Government are perfectly happy for Rolls-Royce and others to use facilities available elsewhere in the world. I have discussed the matter with representatives from Rolls-Royce, who tell me that it would cost millions of pounds to continue to use the facilities at Pyestock. It was pointed out that the French have very good facilities, but that is because successive French Governments have been committed to aerospace and have put a lot of money into the development of those facilities.

There is world overcapacity in engine testing facilities, but the country should not be losing Pyestock. That will make us wholly reliant on test facilities abroad in order to remain in the engine development business.

The issue of the cannon for the Eurofighter is extremely important. I hope that, by failing to equip the aircraft with a cannon, the Government are not merely penny pinching due to Treasury strictures. A pilot with experience in Bosnia told me that a cannon is an important weapon on an attack aircraft. He said that the cannon he used there served three valuable purposes: first, to fire warning shots; secondly, to take out targets such as helicopters; and, thirdly, to strafe in support of ground troops. His view was that we would inevitably have to retrofit the weapon at some time in the future, with all the related costs of modification and pilot retraining.

The Government should reverse their decision and apply the cannon immediately.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Could there not be a fourth advantage? It is a heck of a lot cheaper to fire a cannon than a missile, if one has to fire something.

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend is entirely correct. That point should also be borne in mind.

Mr. Keetch: May I add a further point? Although electronic counter-measures cannot be deployed against shells from an aircraft, one can deploy them against missiles from an aircraft.

Mr. Howarth: That is game, set and—

Mr. Quentin Davies *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: It is about to be match.

Mr. Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this very important matter once again, because we must go on about it until it gets into the Government's thick heads that what they are dealing with here is penny wise and pound foolish. Does my hon. Friend agree that if, on a mission, a fighter aircraft has used all its missiles—

as it supposedly should do in warfare—if it does not have a cannon it is absolutely defenceless on its way back to base?

Mr. Howarth: Absolutely; as I anticipated, that was game, set and match. However, it is a very serious point. It is a small bit of kit, but it is a reassurance to the pilots and, as my informant tells me, it serves those three valuable purposes.

There is some concern among Royal Air Force pilots that they could be short of spares for the Typhoon, because export clients will be the first to get the spares. Ministers need to reassure Royal Air Force pilots that they will not find themselves grounded because all the spares have been allocated to export customers.

I wish to raise two additional points on flying training. Mention was made of the policing of the no-fly zone in the middle east. That endless straight and level work is not equipping pilots with proper training. There is a great concern that inadequate time should be available for training because of all the pilots' commitments, and that straight and level flying over-desert operations are no substitute for operational combat training.

There is also concern that the Royal Air Force is finding it increasingly difficult to train with the United States Air Force because the number of aircraft that the former can mount at any one time is reducing as a result of the unavailability of spares and other serviceability problems. That is a concern if we cannot train with the United States Air Force.

I mentioned in an intervention on the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) the issue of the Mull of Kintyre Chinook crash. I wish to add my voice to the voices of those who feel that the verdict is wholly unsatisfactory. The initial Royal Air Force board of inquiry that investigated the accident could neither criticise the pilots for human failings nor determine a definite cause of the accident. It seems to me that the Government are in breach of the Royal Air Force's own regulation that only in cases in which there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever should deceased aircrew be found negligent.

In an answer given in the other place on 3 October, Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean said:

> It is possible to be certain of the cause for something happening even though the precise details of events leading up to it are less definite.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 3 October 2000: Vol. 616, c. WA 208.]

That is a contradiction in terms. The fact is that the board of inquiry is not certain what happened, and the Royal Air Force regulation requires that those men, although deceased, be given the benefit of the doubt. Certainly their families would appreciate that; they resent the slur on the character of those two young men for what happened and the ultimate finding of the two senior reviewing officers. I see my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) on the Front Bench. The father of one of those pilots is a constituent of his, and I know how much my right hon. Friend is concerned about the matter.

The remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) on political correctness were absolutely spot-on. The Government should not be continuing down this road of political correctness because it corrodes the ethos of the services. They will not see the effect of it tomorrow, next month or next year, but in a few years' time we shall all see the effect, because it will serve to undermine the effectiveness of our armed forces to do what we believe they should be doing, which is to be trained for war fighting, not peacekeeping—for defending these islands, as they have done with such spectacular success for the past 50 years.

8.53 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): As this debate is taking place so close to Armistice day, I trust that the House will permit me if I do what I sometimes do in such debates, which is to relate a personal story. It is not from a history book; it is from a newspaper, as recently as Saturday 28 October.

The story told is that of Mr. Geoffrey Delaroy-Hall, the son of a Jamaican father and an English mother, who left school in the second world war, became one of the only coloured pilots in Bomber Command, flew 47 missions over Nazi-occupied territory and was awarded the distinguished flying cross for his skill, courage and daring. He is now 79 and the reason that his story was in the paper so recently was that his next-door neighbour, a 30-year-old white, drug-abusing racist, had been given community service and two years' probation for persistently vandalising his property, waging a campaign of abuse against him and threatening to burn him alive as he slept.

Mr. Delaroy-Hall said:

> I was the only coloured chap in the squadron, but I never encountered any racism.
>
> We were all in it together and there was marvellous camaraderie. I never considered myself coloured—I considered myself English and fighting for my country.

He explained that he would not leave his home, despite the continuing threat. He said that his neighbour

> was not going to get away with it. You have to stand up to bullies, otherwise they just get bolder and bolder and turn threats into actions.

How fitting it is that that gentleman—to whom we should all pay tribute at this time of the year for what he did for our freedom in the second world war—is still correctly applying the lessons that were learned at great cost in the run-up to the second world war. He is even doing so in the personal battle that, disgracefully, he faces today. I am not surprised, but I am sickened, by the fact that the racist thug next door, who had previously been in court and sentenced to various light punishments, has still not received a custodial sentence.

I come to the more general substance of the debate. It is only fair, at the start of my speech, to inform the House of the subjects that I intend to touch on: Kosovo, dictators, Russia, nuclear deterrence and the European security and defence policy. I confidently predict that this is one of the few occasions on which hon. Members will be positively glad to hear me discuss the European security and defence policy, because that will signify that the end is in sight.

Earlier this year, I achieved the summit of my realistic parliamentary ambition by being appointed to the Select Committee on Defence. I was pleased by the fact that we embarked on an investigation into the lessons of Kosovo, and I was even more pleased by the results. Several hon. Members had argued persistently that this was the first example in history of a war being won by air power alone—though many in the House had doubted that—and

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

we had a great opportunity to put those points to a succession of highly qualified witnesses, whom we examined. A definite conclusion emerged—it was felt that although it was impossible to quantify exactly how much was due to which particular factor, air power was only one of four factors that operated to achieve the result in Kosovo, and that it was incorrect to claim that air power alone had secured that result. The four factors were air power, the threat of the use of ground forces, the continuing cohesion of the alliance throughout the crisis, and the fact that the Russians had decided not to back Milosevic during the crisis.

The Committee came up with hard-hitting conclusions, some of which were reasonably predictable. After all, in relation to air power, Air Chief Marshal Sir Michael Graydon, one of the most recent former chiefs of air staff, said right at the outset that it was a mistake specifically to rule out the possible use of ground forces in the crisis because, even if we were not planning to use those forces, the threat that we might do so would be strategically highly significant. The fact that we bent over backwards to rule out the use of ground forces sent to Milosevic the signal that he did not need to configure his forces on the ground to meet the threat of a ground attack.

Mr. Keetch: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown)—whose book launch I have just attended—for making it clear during the campaign that we should not have ruled out the threat of the use of ground forces? The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), however, wanted to rule out their use.

Dr. Lewis: If the hon. Gentleman had attended more of this debate rather than the book launch, he would know that that point had already been made on behalf of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown). I was arguing it throughout that period, as hon. Members on both sides of the House will remember. It is enough for me to bear responsibility for my own predictions without having to take on those of other members of my party or of any other party with whom I may happen to disagree in any instance.

The removal of the threat meant that Milosevic could hide so much of his armour that our Royal Air Force pilots did not have the targets at which to aim that they otherwise would have had. In a sense, they lost all the way down the line, because they ended up being criticised for not achieving a greater hit rate in the bombing attacks. In fact, it had been a mistake to enable the aggressor—in this case, Milosevic—to hide so many potential targets that otherwise would undoubtedly have been destroyed.

We all know why the threat was removed. It relates to the third factor: cohesion and the idea that democratic Governments in the alliance would not wear the prospect of deploying ground forces. There is a difference between not specifically making an overt threat and—in that case, quite wrongly—specifically ruling it out. If ever there was a role for deception policy, it was in that area. Even if we did not intend so to act, we ought to have done everything possible to convey to Milosevic that perhaps we would have done so. Eventually, of course, we did convey that message to Milosevic, but by then we were really intent on such action.

I shall leave the subject of Kosovo by mentioning the Russians. The point relates to something that was referred to earlier: the prospect of distinguishing between crisis management and all-out war. We know that the justification for the European security and defence identity—or policy as we must now call it—is crisis-management rather than all-out war. However, had, for example, the Russians taken a much more aggressive stance, a crisis could have become all-out war—entirely uncontrollably. I hope to return to that at the end of my remarks.

There was one point from "Lessons of Kosovo" that we ought not to have had to learn all over again, because we learned it in spades in the 1930s. Unfortunately, the leaders of democratic countries seldom fully appreciate the mentality of dictators. I should like to refer to just a couple of items in the report to point that up.

The Chairman of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), put the matter to the Chief of Defence Staff and the permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence in the following terms:

> Was not escalating the ethnic cleansing an option . . . to throw your hands in the air and say "We did not anticipate this was what he was going to do" indicates that your war gaming was grossly deficient.

The Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, replied:

> I think it is extremely difficult to get into Milosevic's mind. We did have people who sat down and said "I am thinking like Milosevic" and we did have psychologists in NATO who actually studied the man's record. It was extremely difficult. Thank heavens he is not like us.

One can say that again.

The permanent secretary, Kevin Tebbit, gave a slightly more revealing answer:

> We did not expect the barbarity or the savagery. We did not reckon on the readiness to do quite what they did.

I can only endorse the Defence Committee's conclusion:

> it is apparent from the evidence we have taken that, on the UK side at least, little detailed analysis was conducted of how Milosevic and his elite would be likely to react as the target of a coercive campaign . . . We believe there was insufficient understanding within the Alliance of the character and mentality of the dictator.

Have we not heard that in the past, when dictators have run rings around democrats by holding out that little hope of peace, while all the time remaining intent on conflict?

I welcome the cautionary comments in respect of Russia uttered by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery). Back in 1938, the only Secret Intelligence Service agent to be knighted for services in the field, Sir Paul Dukes, concluded his memoirs:

> Will Russia, with that capacity for extremes which characterises her, emerging from the abyss, cleansed of the putrefaction alike of degenerate Tsarism and soulless Marxism, eventually rise to the topmost heights . . . ? Though the night is still dark, I, for one, will never cease to hope that that fair dawn will break in glory.

We have had false dawns before and I, for one, hope that we are not witnessing another now. Russia is massively enfeebled by her recent experiences and that is why we can take a far more relaxed view of any imminent military threat in the near future or even the medium term. However, I am not encouraged when I hear reports that responsible quarters in Russia are denouncing the Halo Trust—the mine clearance charity with which the late Princess Diana was closely associated—for allegedly training terrorists in military techniques.

Similarly, the tragedy of the Kursk is an account of heartlessness, deception and downright lies. At first, even the date on which it happened was not admitted—it was said to have occurred a day later than it had. It was claimed at various times that another submarine had been involved; that there had been survivors; and then that there had been no survivors of the initial explosion. Now, we learn that there had been survivors, after all. As recently as 25 October, the press agency AFP quoted Sergei Zhekov, a member of a Russian parliamentary probe into the catastrophe, telling the Interfax press agency that

> he had obtained new facts from Russian naval chiefs and the constructors of the Kursk that backed up his latest theory

that the Kursk sank after colliding with a British submarine. According to the account, the rescue buoys found after the accident bore the colours of Royal Navy buoys, and that immediately after the tragedy

> the British navy carried out its first large-scale emergency and rescue exercises for the past 10 years.

Finally, an event that this House knows a little about was cited—it was noted that certain submarines

> were withdrawn from service by the British navy in the space of one week.

That is not merely a new version of events. As early as 19 August, the Russian press had published a story in which a source at northern fleet headquarters was quoted claiming that a British submarine had been involved. Once again, it was claimed that British buoys had been detected. It was also alleged that

> the British submarine lay on the sea bed for 24 hours after the collision and, apparently, once the damage, which was less substantial than of the Russian submarine, was repaired, it set course for Norway.

According to the information quoted:

> Russian special services have surmised that with the assistance of their experts at the scene of the accident, the British intended to try to destroy evidence which proved the fact of a collision with nothing other than a British submarine.

That sort of attitude, in the face of categorical and, I am sure, truthful statements by the Ministry of Defence at the outset that no British submarine was involved in the disaster, can be described only as provocative in the extreme.

Mr. Keetch: I was in Washington at the time of the accident. The allegations to which the hon. Gentleman refers from the Russian media were transmitted in the American media. Rebuttals have been rightly issued by the Government, but does the hon. Gentleman think that it would be worth while if the Minister were tonight to deny that there was any British involvement?

Dr. Lewis: I am sure that the Minister will take whatever action he thinks appropriate. I am confident that the MOD has stated from the outset that the allegations are claptrap, garbage and sheer invention. Worse, however, it is malicious invention, and it does not augur well for the future.

From the future, I refer briefly to the past. I have had a little tussle with the MOD over some time about the lessons that we might draw from the ending of the cold war in the way that it did. The tussle began when about two years ago I attended at Chatham house the launching of the television series about the cold war. It was a long series undertaken by Channel 4 and Jeremy Isaacs. I was concerned that at the launching the well-known KGB spokesman, Vladimir Posner, who now holds an academic post in an American university—perhaps appropriately—stated that whereas the Americans had had their Operation Dropshot contingency plans for a third world war with the Russians during the cold war, there had never been any Soviet plan to attack America or western Europe.

I was somewhat concerned about that, and I wrote to the then Secretary of State for Defence, Lord Robertson as he now is. I pointed out that it must surely be the case that, among the military archives found when the communist empire in eastern Europe and central Europe collapsed, there would be contingency plans showing precisely what was intended and thus showing that military deterrents, and in particular nuclear deterrents, had been effective throughout the cold war in preventing the conflict from breaking out.

I was fobbed off with a reply referring to security of documents of that sort. I believe that there is no legitimate reason why we should now, after the ending of the cold war, fail to examine the lessons that are shown by the access that we undoubtedly have to the military plans of the former Warsaw pact countries to attack NATO.

All we can do at present is to return to what evidence we can obtain unofficially as it were, via historians. I shall read a brief extract from the memoirs, which have recently been published in France, of Sergo Beria, the son of Lavrenti Beria, who as we know was the Himmler of Stalin's day. In something of a journalistic coup, the brilliant French Sovietologist, Dr. Françoise Thom, has interviewed him at great length and written a substantial book setting out what Sergo Beria has to say. The extract reads:

> Our acquisition of the atomic bomb in 1949, far from pacifying Stalin, persuaded him that henceforth anything was possible and we could soon move onto the attack. Understanding that our totalitarian system had the advantage over the democracies of being able rapidly to concentrate maximum resources in one area, he hoped to use this temporary superiority to ensure himself a definitive victory, not only in Europe but globally.

The book reveals also that Stalin envisaged taking the whole of Europe hostage, gambling that the Americans would never dare to drop atomic bombs on Europe. Sergo Beria states:

> My father did not share this vision.

Referring to Marshal Zhukov of second world war and cold war fame, Beria's son said:

> I overheard the following conversation between him and my father in 1952: "The balance of power has altered. We now have anti-aircraft defences. We can win," said Zhukov. "Certainly", said my father, "and then? Our own Soviet territory would be devastated by American nuclear bombs, Europe would be destroyed. What would be the use?".

Helpful as it is to have such evidence of the efficacy of nuclear deterrence in the early years of the cold war, it would be even more helpful in fighting the battles that we will probably have to fight again, from whichever side of the House, for strong defences in a period of confrontation to have material that shows how justified

[Dr. Lewis]

NATO's nuclear deterrent policy was for the duration of the cold war and what a key role it played in winning that unfought battle.

Time is pressing—

Mr. Robathan: Keep going. My hon. Friend's speech is good.

Dr. Lewis: I am being encouraged to carry on. I shall reinstate a subject that I was about to cut out of my speech. I want to refer to a report by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs on "Weapons of Mass Destruction." I inquired whether there was any prospect of it being debated in the Chamber, and I understand that there are no plans to do so at present. Therefore, it is legitimate to refer to three of its conclusions: one good, one bad and one rather contradictory.

The good conclusion is in paragraph 86, which states:

> We accept the Government's statement that, with the reductions in nuclear capability it has made, the UK's deterrent "is the minimum necessary to provide for our security for the foreseeable future and smaller than those of the major nuclear powers." We recommend that the Government make every endeavour to bring about reductions by all nuclear weapon states to genuinely minimum deterrent levels.

That is a good conclusion because it shows that there is no fat left on the British nuclear deterrent. We cannot cut it any further without getting rid of it, and we must not get rid of it unless we are to unlearn all the lessons that the cold war taught us.

The bad conclusion is in paragraph 124, which states:

> Britain as a nuclear weapon state, a permanent member of the Security Council, a leading member of the NATO and a member of the G8 and the EU has a key role and a key responsibility in trying to put all Weapons of Mass Destruction under international arms control regimes and in making progress towards their complete elimination. This must surely be one of the highest foreign policy priorities for the Government.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Nonsense.

Dr. Lewis: As my hon. Friend observes, that is nonsense. It is dangerous nonsense.

Mr. Robathan: It is garbage, to coin a phrase.

Dr. Lewis: Indeed, it is garbage—the expression much used in the exchanges between the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan).

I shall not detain the House by pointing out yet again the dangerous instability that would ensue if we ever had a nuclear-free world, which would simply make the world safe again for non-nuclear viciousness and massacres of conventional warfare.

The confusing and contradictory conclusion is in paragraph 82 of the report, which states:

> The five nuclear weapon states, including the UK, have given an "unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total abolition of their nuclear arsenals." Mr. Hain—

referring to the Foreign Office Minister—

> regards this as a strengthening of the Government's commitment under Article VI of the non-proliferation treaty. The only trouble with that, as I have endeavoured to point out to the House on more than one occasion, is that article VI also requires general and complete disarmament of all weapons. Whereas I am happy to see nuclear weapons go when the world is such an idyllic place, such a wonderful paradise, such a trusting haven that we do not need weapons of any sort, the idea of getting rid of the one before we can safely get rid of the other is nothing but dangerous folly.

Later in the paragraph, there is something more encouraging, which I am sure the Minister will be much more relieved to hear. It states:

> In the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) the Government made clear that it would include the UK's nuclear weapons in strategic arms talks "when we are satisfied with progress towards our goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons."

It continues:

> It was stated in the SDR that "while large nuclear arsenals and risks of proliferation remain, our minimum deterrent remains a necessary element of our security".

Mr. Spellar: Hear, hear.

Dr. Lewis: I am glad that the Minister endorses that position, although the idea of reaching a total elimination of nuclear weapons in advance of reaching a conflict-free world still fills me with alarm.

I have reached the blessed point that I promised at the outset, which is the moment when I shall refer briefly to the European security and defence identity, or policy, as it may now be transmogrifying itself. I have tried on numerous occasions to explain in the Select Committee on Defence that that is helping to recreate the uncertainties of the events that led both to the first world war and to the second world war.

In the run-up to those two conflicts, there was never absolute clarity about who would be brought into play if one country attacked another. Perhaps a third country would come in; perhaps it would not. Perhaps a country would stand by its treaty obligations, but then again, perhaps it would not.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: We did.

Dr. Lewis: The real viciousness is that, as my hon. Friend observes, when England did that—

Mr. Keetch: Britain.

Dr. Lewis:—when Britain did that, Hitler, who might have been deterred had he known that it would precipitate war with the United Kingdom and the British empire, was not deterred because he hoped right till the end that we could be persuaded to continue to dishonour the bilateral relationships and alliances that had already been dishonoured so deplorably in the case of Czechoslovakia.

The whole point about NATO was that it showed any potential aggressor that if it went to war with any of the member states, straight away it would be at war with the United Kingdom and, even more importantly, with the Americans. Anything that we do to construct something that gives the possibility that a conflict could break out and be managed, at least in its early stages, without the involvement of the Americans runs the risk of escalating out of control, so that a conflict that might

have been deterred with the rigid network and superstructure of NATO properly in place could break out almost unintendedly by slow degrees and miscalculation.

That is a bitter mistake that was made in the 1930s, and it was an achievement of a Labour Government in the late 1940s which brought about the NATO alliance. It is sad that a Labour Government in the 21st century are undermining that important achievement.

9.23 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Following that masterly warm-up, I look forward to the full-day debate on defence policy.

Returning to defence and the armed forces, we have had a remarkable day of debate. It has been an unusually good-natured day, even though there have been some stark differences of opinion across the House. That is as it should be, and should come as no surprise.

Earlier today, I was thinking how things used to go with the former Secretary of State for Defence, Lord Robertson. I remembered that after an early debate following the general election in 1997, he sent me in a brown envelope a copy of a speech that he had made in Lagos on 16 March 1993. It was a speech to the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs entitled, "How to Survive Opposition in Democratic Politics: the Role of a Loyal Opposition". I treasure it. The speech has 12 points, but I shall not delay the House with all of them; instead, I shall refer briefly to three. Item 8 advised:

> Use politeness as a weapon. Abuse is wearing and off-putting, but exaggerated politeness can be most effective as a verbal stiletto . . . Our system can still, notwithstanding these rules, allow robust debate, but it doesn't sound as off-putting to the electors as the Australian use of the word "scum bag"—a common parliamentary expression of affection.

Item 9 counselled:

> Use humour ruthlessly. Getting the nation to laugh at your opponents is more devastating than a hundred political debating points. Every politician claims to be able to take a joke but in truth we are the most sensitive creatures, desperate to be popular and loved, and to be laughed at, especially by our own supporters, is deeply wounding. The people also enjoy it. In eastern Europe where political jokes were once a substitute for politics, they say that the jokers are now elected to parliament.

Item 10 stated:

> Don't ever get used to Opposition or start enjoying it.

I have no intention of doing that.

Today, I looked at the Ministry of Defence website to check the Department's diary. I did that for a good reason. Last Thursday, when we held the procurement debate, I checked the ministerial diary on the website. It stated: "Announcements: none; speeches: none" yet the Secretary of State announced the six ro-ro ferries and the two landing vessels. Today, the website stated: "Announcements: none; speeches: none" yet the Secretary of State made three announcements in his speech. They were about submarines and the invitation to tender for Bowman, which was issued today. I shall read my copy of *Hansard* carefully to make sure that I heard the third announcement correctly. The Secretary of State seemed to announce that the next strategic tankers would be built in Australia—good news for the Clyde, no doubt.

After listening to the Secretary of State's speech, in which he made several important points which we shall consider, we enjoyed the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) very much.

The Secretary of State and others made several points which need correcting. The first point is about budgets. The Secretary of State, of whom I am fond, bangs on about £16 million-worth of defence cuts. I remind him that the Labour party will have knocked £5 billion off the defence budget by the next general election. Labour Members must stop peddling the myth that the modest reversal of their defence cuts means that there is real growth in the defence budget for the first time in 10 years. Members of the military roll around laughing when they hear that.

The Secretary of State and the Minister were members of the Labour party at the time of "Options for Change". Labour Members voted to cut the defence budget by 50 per cent. after "Options for Change". That would be ridiculous enough if it were not for the Liberal Democrat position. Despite the piety of Liberal Democrat Members and the crocodile tears that they shed for the defence budget at the time of "Options for Change", Labour and Liberal Democrat Members wanted to go further.

The Liberal Democrats devised a policy paper in which they planned to reduce the Army to 73,000 people instead of 116,000. I absolve the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) of responsibility because he was not a Member of Parliament at the time. He is a new boy, so we cannot get cross about what he said.

Under "Options for Change", the Army was reduced by approximately 44,000 to 116,000 over three years, in response to the lessening of the Soviet threat.

Mr. Keetch: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for absolving me. Will he confirm that the manifesto on which I was elected in 1997 called for the Ministry of Defence budget to remain as it was, and that the position of the Liberal Democrats in the last general election—when I was elected—was to maintain the level of spending at that time?

Mr. Key: I cannot confirm that, because I was not bored enough to read the Liberal Democrat manifesto. However, I point out that under the tenure of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), there was an increase in defence spending. Our policy at the last election was for a period of stability in the defence budget—so it is silly and sterile to continue to discuss that matter.

When we were battling with the tremendous upheaval in the post-cold war era, Labour and Liberal Democrat Members did not fight us at every turn and say, "Don't cut here; don't follow the lead of our NATO partners." Far from it. They said, "Go further. Cut more." And it was the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), then a Labour defence spokesman, who said at a *Tribune* fringe meeting sponsored by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament on 1 October 1990:

> The case for these savings is not a matter of dispute.

That was Labour party policy.

The hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) made many telling points, as I would have expected. It is important for Members with experience of these matters to share the detail—the nitty-gritty—with the House. Of course there is a place for grand international politics and policy, but I took to heart what the hon. Gentleman said about the royal tournament, the Gurkhas, nuclear tests, unexploded ordnance and arms control, because he is an expert.

[Mr. Key]

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) made a traditional speech based on great experience, concentrating on one or two issues. I echo what he said about the crash of the Chinook ZD 576. What he said was, of course, right. Nothing that anyone can say will convince me otherwise than that there is doubt: it is ridiculous to say that there is no possible doubt in such circumstances.

There is another consideration, however. People wonder why a journal such as *Computer Weekly* takes such a detailed interest—and it must also be an expensive interest—in the case. It does so because the case is a test case for computer software projects. It sets a precedent. Ruling out the possibility that software is ever to blame, and blaming pilots instead, sends all the wrong signals to software designers.

I strongly agree with the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife. This is not a vendetta, or an attempt to get at anyone in the Ministry of Defence. It seems to me that there was what might be described as a systems failure. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is an eminent lawyer, and I trust his judgment. Moreover, it is also my view that the verdict should be set aside, if that is possible. Legal distractions may have to be addressed.

The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) spoke at some length, saying that we had got it all wrong. His speech was followed by that of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery). It is a particular pleasure for me to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who has enormous experience of the whole field of defence and foreign affairs. He served with the Royal Air Force in the second world war, and subsequently took a long-term interest in relations between America and Europe and, in particular, the United Kingdom. I therefore listened with great attention to what he said about heavy lift, and about the future of the Western European Union. Moreover, in view of the devastating quotation produced by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), who cited what the Prime Minister said in June 1997 about the WEU, and the complete volte face that has taken place in Labour policy since then, I feel that my right hon. Friend is entirely right to demand answers from the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) spoke with experience and eloquence—following his distinguished service in the Coldstream Guards—about his active service overseas. He mentioned political correctness, about which I shall have something to say tomorrow—for it is my treat to wind up tomorrow's debate for the Opposition as well.

It was pleasant to hear the gentle, thoughtful tones of the hon. Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins), and I have a great deal of sympathy with what he said about the process of county court evictions, which are the last resort in some technical cases. The Ministry of Defence had no intention of sending people out of married quarters on a sour note: I understand that. Perhaps we can find a better technical solution. There are ways in which these things can be managed. My local authority contains a large number of married quarters, and has a good liaison with the Ministry of Defence. I think that the situation has improved dramatically over the past 10 years.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) spoke with great authority, on the basis of experience. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) spoke movingly on behalf of his constituents. I am delighted that he wrung a commitment out of the Minister: I think that it is the first time that such a commitment has been secured from the Dispatch Box under the present Government. Of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot is entirely right about the future of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency about relations with the United States not being all that they seem, especially at a working level. The guys doing the tests and trials, going over to talk to Lockheed Martin and others and working alongside American forces personnel report that things are not as they were; the trust has been damaged.

I should be grateful to the Minister if he would consider two or three policy issues; I do not expect answers now. I am a bit of an IT junkie these days. I decided that I had better find out about IT because if I did not, I would never catch up. I start my parliamentary day by checking out the websites. This morning, I looked at the Ministry of Defence website in expectation. I went to the update page, "What's new on the MOD website." The most recent entry, dated 3 March 2000, on that page says:

> The new Defence Estates website is now available, having been launched by the Under-Secretary.
>
> The MOD has a new Minister—Dr. Lewis Moonie, Under-Secretary of State for Defence.

That is the most updated update on the MOD website.

Mr. Spellar: That is not true.

Mr. Key: I challenge the Minister to go and check whether it is true, because I took that information from the web this morning.

I then checked out the Defence Estates website, which I recommend; it is very good indeed. The latest entry on that website is dated 12 October, which is very recent. The way in which Defence Estates is filling in the background to the policy decisions that it has to implement is to be commended. I learned a lot from the website this morning. It states:

> The Army's need to ensure that infantry soldiers are fully trained for the operational demands of today and the future, makes it essential that Commoners' Rights on Warcop Training Area in Cumbria are acquired by the MOD.

That website is very good. I clicked on the button for further information and then began to understand what at first appearance seemed to be pretty controversial stuff.

I then turned to the Army website, which is up to date and about 10 times as good as the MOD website—I congratulate the Army on it. Its latest entry, dated 24 October, states:

> Soldiers attempt double marathon.

There is much else that is exciting on the Army website, and I recommend it. The TA section is also excellent.

I then used a link to the Army Families Federation website. I congratulate the AFF on tackling many of the issues that affect the families and the Government's people policy. Its website represents a great advance and must be widely used because it is accessible from Cyprus, Germany, Northern Ireland and elsewhere. However, that catalogue of delight has a downside: when I phoned the Army Families Federation to congratulate it on the website, I heard that it was having a tough time because

it has had to meet the website set-up costs—many thousands of pounds—and is having huge difficulty financing the website's maintenance. The federation will have to come down a peg or two; it thinks that it can update the website itself, but that the quality will suffer—nevertheless, it is a tremendous effort.

We are honoured that the new Under-Secretary of State for Defence—as the website declared him to be this morning—has just entered the Chamber. I congratulate him on his appointment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): What?

Mr. Key: The Under-Secretary will find out what I mean later. *[Interruption.]* I can reassure him that he is still at the MOD.

The Army Families Federation keeps us well briefed on housing and married quarters issues. Many hon. Members have referred to those continuing problems. The sale of married quarters to Annington Homes was the best answer that the Conservative party could find when in government to release money that would otherwise be withheld by the Treasury. That sale was hugely controversial, but it seems to be working quite well now. However, there are still problems with the Defence Housing Executive, such as the cutting of its budget, and pushing back refurbishment by a couple of years was not welcome.

Another issue that affects many Army families overseas is the pet travel scheme, at which I ask Ministers to look seriously. The situation in Germany and in Cyprus is particularly difficult. Will Ministers look at the situation in Germany, where there is a dangerous dogs Act? Staffordshire bull terriers are subject to the new size and weight limits under that legislation, which is distressing for families. It is also feared that the Act will cover soppy Labradors. It will be difficult for forces families if their Labradors are classed as dangerous dogs in Germany.

There is also a problem in relation to Cyprus. I believe that the King's Own Scottish Borderers are due to return to the United Kingdom in February 2001. As many as 400 owners of domestic pets will expect to take advantage of the Government's inclusion of Cyprus in the pet travel scheme. That is welcome. However, there are logistical problems; my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) has brought the matter to my attention and I am grateful to him. Not only does movement in January look difficult, but the legislation necessary to include Cyprus in the scheme might be knocked back because of the Government's legislative problems in the other place. There are also problems of transit. I understand that both British Airways and Cyprus Airways are reluctant to carry pets back to this country—and, if they did, where would they go? The issue is causing distress to families in Cyprus on quite a large scale. I would be grateful if Ministers looked at it.

The final issue to which I want to refer is the problem of medical services and attention to medical records. We know that, in Sierra Leone, there were some 50 cases of malaria. By good luck, the first forces in happened to be heading for an exercise, so they had all the right inoculations and all was well, but I think I am right in saying that the spearhead battalion was not inoculated. Everyone in the spearhead battalion cannot be completely inoculated with everything all the time. It is medically a bad idea. I understand all that, but there was a problem and it was not unique.

I discussed the matter with some Australian army officers, who regularly have to operate in tropical situations. They were amazed at the drug being used by the British military and were not surprised that there were problems of dizziness, loss of vision and so on, which could be dangerous in a military situation.

I remember my experience with anti-malaria pills in Nicaragua. I was issued with two bottles. I had to take the pills from one bottle every day and from the other bottle every week. I got them the wrong way round. It was a most peculiar experience—not a very good one.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: While my hon. Friend is on the subject of Army medical services, will he pay tribute to the TA, which is providing so many personnel to cover for military medical services in Kosovo, Bosnia and elsewhere? They are playing a valuable part.

Mr. Key: I echo that warm tribute to the TA and its contribution to defence medical services. We look forward to a resolution of the problems in defence medical services. No doubt that is a debate for another day.

I was pleased that the Minister for the Armed Forces answered a parliamentary question on Monday setting out the MOD's policy on tropical diseases. That is good news because it gets things set out properly, but there is another issue, to which I draw Ministers' attention. Regarding the Defence Committee report—I think it was the second—on Gulf war syndrome, the then Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), said that the MOD faced the problem of a lack of records—when soldiers were inoculated in the field, records were not kept—that one of the answers was likely to be an electronic tag, which could be programmed on site, and that work was being done on that.

That was 1996. In 1999, I took the matter up and asked a parliamentary question. The Minister for the Armed Forces replied in a letter on 19 August, saying that smart cards could have personnel and logistics applications. He said:

> work is still at an early stage, and no decisions have been taken.

I followed that up a year later with a question to the Secretary of State. The Under-Secretary answered on 19 June 2000, saying:

> The possible development of an ID tag or card to store medical information electronically is being considered in the context of plans to provide the Defence Medical Services with a comprehensive and integrated information system.—[*Official Report*, 19 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 35W.]

That was good news, but when I went to a Land Command briefing in September, no one present had ever heard anything about any such scheme. I wondered what was going on, given that six years had elapsed. Last week, I read an article in *Computer Weekly* headed "US Military Gets smartcards", which stated:

> The US Department of Defence . . . has this month started issuing smartcards for more than four million users around the world in what is the largest-ever single installation of digital identity. The cards will be used for a wide range of applications, including building access and financial access, as well as access to government information. The card will serve as the authentication token for the DoD's computerised public key infrastructure . . . The target date for completing the initial issuing of the new card is the end of September 2001.

[Mr. Key]

The United States will issue a card to 4 million personnel in a year's time. Ministers therefore owe us an explanation about what the Government have been doing for six years on smart tags. I know that this difficult issue is being examined in the review of defence medical services. The matter is urgent, as our troops would benefit from proper medical records being kept and, in the long run, this is a spend-to-save economy which we may well support. I should therefore be grateful if the Government reconsidered the matter.

We shall return to this debate tomorrow, and I simply wish to echo what I said earlier about today's debate being well informed and good natured. We have covered a lot of ground and I look forward to tomorrow.

9.46 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): Inevitably, certain items will be dealt with tomorrow, some by the Under-Secretary, and some by myself.

The hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) said that our debate had been good-humoured and good-natured, which was generally true. Unfortunately, however, it started rather unpleasantly with attacks from the hon. Members for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) and for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) concerning Air Marshal Day's appearance before the Select Committee on Defence. I checked what happened. Officials asked Air Marshal Day whether he would give an interview to *The Sunday Times*. That paper could not get to the briefing that Air Marshal Day and an official gave on Tuesday. The interview was not at the instigation of Ministers although, of course, Ministers' offices would have been informed of it in the normal way. Any suggestion that Air Marshal Day was pressurised into giving an interview is utter nonsense and shows that the hon. Members for Portsmouth, South and for Canterbury do not know the man. It is appropriate to put that on the record. Indeed, the hon. Gentlemen gave differing interpretations of the matter and might have done better to have waited until the record came out, rather than leap in as they did.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) got in on the act and, as usual, returned to the question of the Chief of the Defence Staff in Kosovo. During the major conflict in Kosovo in which the armed forces were engaged day in, day out, we all remember that the hon. Gentleman's main contribution was to call for the Chief of the Defence Staff to be sacked. The hon. Gentleman may think that we have forgotten that, but we certainly have not. Frankly, he will never be taken seriously on defence in this House until he apologises for that despicable behaviour.

The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) returned again to the question of the Navy not leaving port at Christmas. I thought that I dealt with that quite well at the time, when I said that that was a very good thing too. Apart from the strategic deterrent or important operations, I would certainly hope that the fleet would be alongside at Christmas so that personnel could be at home with their families. It never ceases to amaze me why Conservative Members keep raising that issue.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) mentioned his experience of going to Kosovo. It reminded me of an occasion, in August, shortly after we had gone into Kosovo, when I was walking down Pristina high street with one well-armed soldier wearing a flak jacket walking in front of me and another one walking behind me. I asked the young officer accompanying me whether he was expecting trouble. He said, "Not really, but losing a Minister is not very career enhancing." I said, "It seems that your interests and mine coincide, son." We got on quite well.

The speech of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and those of some other hon. Members seemed to be slightly obsessive in relation to Europe. It was a little reminiscent of the obsessive period in the Labour party when everything had to be analysed in relation to class. There were class analyses of, for example, industrial relations, social relations, the neighbourhood and the family. There was also an analysis of football and the class struggle.

A colleague in the Greenwich Labour party told me about a debate on pets being kept on one of the local estates. The argument went on for a while, until one of the members got up and said, "Comrades, are we not forgetting something? Comrade Lenin had a cat." After that intervention, a whole new debate was begun on that interesting bit of sociological information. It is getting a little like that among Conservative Members—everything comes back to their obsession with Europe. They are concerned about Europe and football, or about Europe and defence.

Conservative Members' obsession with Europe extends even to mounting a sustained criticism of a very eminent European official. The fact that he is a previous Secretary General of NATO did not seem to phase them in their criticism. They seemed to think that he is a bit subversive, which makes it a little surprising that he was appointed to that office when they were in government and, presumably, had some influence in the matter. They have attacked someone who has served Europe, European defence and NATO extremely well.

I think that Conservative Members, rather than continuing the internal Conservative party feud on Europe, should be considering what best serves the United Kingdom's interests and examining—as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said—what works best in the opinion of other NATO members, including the United States.

Of course we do not want separate planning and the creation of a parallel bureaucracy; Europe and NATO do not have the resources to do that. That is precisely why we want to use NATO assets. I should think that hon. Members would want to support that position, which sustains the alliance rather than weakens it. One of the key questions frequently asked by our friends in the United States is about Europe spending more money, getting greater output and bearing its share of the defence burden.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) talked about the Defence Aviation Repair Agency at St. Athan. A clear feature of DARA's plan has been to consolidate and specialise on different sites. The DARA Fleetlands facility, for example, transferred electronics work to DARA Sealands. So successful has that specialisation been, and so successful the management of DARA, that various leading American companies are working in partnership with it to service third-party contracts. In Almondbank, in Perth, for example, DARA

has been servicing not only our Chinooks, getting them back in the air in record time, but servicing those of the Dutch.

It is a real success story, but it requires efficient management and some rationalisation and specialisation, particularly in the use of specialist equipment. Obviously, there will have to be discussions with the work force and with their trade unions, to ensure that the work force's best interests are accommodated. However, we should not resist rationalisation without paying due regard to its benefits.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan talked about married quarters. I do not know the details of the case that he described, but I am prepared to look into it. Sometimes a local housing authority requires a formal legal eviction notice in order that someone can get council accommodation. That happens within families, because, as Members of Parliament, we have to tell people to write a letter, giving the member of their family notice to leave the property so that they can then formally register, under the required regulations, with the local authority for housing. Sometimes that necessity is distressing, but there is a reason for it. However, that does not mean that mistakes are not made.

We understand the problems of housing that we inherited, not least the rushed and botched job of the sale to Annington Homes. The amount needed for repair was underestimated and therefore the time scale for the renovation of the properties had to be moved from 2003 to 2005. However, nearly 25 per cent. of the stock is at standard 1 condition and about 52 per cent requires some refurbishment—but not a great amount—to raise it to standard 1. Quite a bit of the stock still requires refurbishment and at least £61 million will be spent in this financial year on upgrades.

I take the point that the focus has been on family quarters and some fairly appalling single living accommodation. The Under-Secretary is responsible for our construction programme and he is working with Defence Estates and the top level budget holders on a programme for refurbishing or rebuilding properties. That is important.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) talked about SSNs; I am pleased that he welcomed the good news on HMS Triumph. He talked about co-operation with other countries, and I have drawn attention to the fact that we have had discussions with our long-standing partner in nuclear submarine operations, the US Navy. Those discussions have been successful and we work closely with it on the technical details. We also support each other.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife, the hon. Members for Portsmouth, South, for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and others talked about the Mull of Kintyre Chinook crash. We part company here, as we believe that flying too fast, too low and into fog is negligence. Frankly, various other details that are put forward do not change that fundamental point.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I am grateful to the Minister for referring to that matter, if disappointed by his remarks. What experience has the Chinook fleet had since the accident with the full authority digital engine control system? What other inadvertent manoeuvres has the fleet been involved in since then?

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Gentleman with those details. I have talked to many of the Chinook pilots and asked what they think about the helicopter. They say that it is an excellent craft to work with; indeed, one pilot said to me, "Do you honestly think I would be flying this if I didn't feel it was safe?" Hon. Members ought to balance that with the thoughts put to them by those running the campaign about that crash.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) asked about the role of the Ministry of Defence police in Kosovo. There are 56 members of the MOD police in the international police in Kosovo, as well as a number who are working in the criminal intelligence unit and the Kosovo police school. However, the quality of their contribution is also significant. For example, two of them are working on an international team that is assessing police from other countries. They are making a significant contribution to policing with the quality of their work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde was also right that we are looking at the tour of the duty and considering whether more flexibility can be introduced.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins) rightly drew attention to cuts in the army under "Options for Change". I was pleased that he drew attention to the improvements that have taken place in wages and conditions. He, along with a number of hon. Members—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

PETITIONS

Child Labour

10 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): I wish to present a petition signed by the staff and pupils of Repton school in my constituency. It declares that Her Majesty's Government have ratified the convention on the rights of the child, are therefore committed to children's rights and therefore have a responsibility to do all that they can to help end the exploitation of child labourers in overseas countries.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for International Development that all aid to countries such as Indonesia, India, Mali or Pakistan, where child labour is known to be an extensive problem, should have a reasonable percentage of it linked to a programme of education for the child labourers.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Formby Fire Station

10.1 pm

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): I have the honour to present this petition to the House of Commons. It has arisen because the Merseyside fire authority has indicated that it intends to change the staffing arrangements at Formby fire station from continuous staffing arrangements at night to part-time staffing.

[Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas]

A community safety programme has been introduced but has not been fully implemented, and therefore we are not assured of its effectiveness.

This petition declares, therefore, that we are totally opposed to the proposed change in the night-time staffing arrangements put forward by the Merseyside fire authority with regard to the Formby fire station. We believe that any change to the existing staffing arrangements at Formby fire station could jeopardise life and property.

The petitioners—some 4,000—therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Home Secretary to reject the application from Merseyside fire authority to change the existing night-time staffing arrangements at Formby fire station.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Mobile Homes (Cheadle Hulme)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

10.2 pm

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Speaker. This is the first opportunity that I have had to do so.

It is a privilege to be able to speak in this Adjournment debate on behalf of my constituents at Chesters Croft in Cheadle Hulme. The Minister has kindly written to me, and spoken to me, to advise me that this matter has, thank goodness, been resolved. I am sure that he will make it clear how it has been resolved when he replies. However, it is right that I put the thanks of my constituents on the record.

The Minister will be aware that my constituents at Chesters Croft live in homes that are classified as mobile, but are permanent in every sense. There is not a wheel in sight, they have brick bases, nice extensions and nice gardens. However, they live adjacent to the central section of the Manchester airport eastern link road, now open and running. Because they are classified as mobile homes, they were denied the right that exists for all residents in homes classified as permanent—that of claiming compensation for the noise pollution and air pollution resulting from the road being built.

The promise that those regulations would be introduced was made at the public inquiry into the Manchester airport eastern link road in 1991. I have lost count of the number of times that I have raised this issue in letters and telephone calls, and even on the Floor of the House. However, I am happy that I will not have to do so any more, and I know that the people in Chesters Croft will be delighted that justice has been done.

I am especially grateful for the kindness shown by the Minister in dealing with the matter. I do not know what has spurred things on so suddenly, but whatever it was, I thank the Government, on behalf of my constituents. I do not want to make any party political points, as no Minister of any Government was directly responsible for the delays, but my constituents had to wait a very long time for the matter to be resolved. Consultation takes time—but nine years is stretching matters somewhat. However, we got there eventually, and I am very grateful to the Minister.

My constituents have asked me to raise two practical points, but I accept that the Minister may not be able to answer them tonight and assure him that a response in writing would be equally acceptable. First, the local authority in Stockport mentioned to some Chesters Croft residents that the regulations arrived at after consultation might take the form of limiting the available compensation to £1,500. Can the Minister confirm that, and did the proposal emerge from the consultation exercise? If he cannot give me the details now, I should be grateful if he would notify me of them later, so that I can explain the matter to my constituents. If that is the case, they will want to know why.

Secondly, will the regulations be retrospective? I hope so, so that the people at Chesters Croft can avail themselves of their rights.

I have no other questions to ask, as the Minister has already resolved the problem.

10.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): May I begin, Mr. Speaker, by joining in the many accolades extended to you on your election? I also congratulate the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) on securing an Adjournment debate on an issue that I know is dear to his heart, and of great importance to his constituents at Chesters Croft, Cheadle Hulme. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words, which are typical of the decency and amiability for which he is so highly regarded in the House.

I am tempted to say, "Thank you, rejoice," and sit down straight away, but the cries for more from all the hon. Members in this full Chamber encourage me to say a few words about this extraordinary story. The hon. Member for Cheadle and his constituents deserve some explanation—and apology—for the very long wait imposed on them.

I confirm at the outset that I well understand, and sympathise with, the frustration and concern repeatedly expressed by the hon. Members for Cheadle and for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples), and by my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr. Sawford), on behalf of their constituents, about the unacceptably long delay in bringing the regulations into force.

I confess that I have not had the opportunity to discover whether a gap in excess of nine years between the commencement of enabling legislation and the subsequent introduction of regulations is an all-time record. If it is not, it cannot be far short. In any event, it is certainly not something that I or my ministerial colleagues condone or regard as acceptable.

As the House well knows, this Government are fully committed, through their agenda for modernising the civil service, to rooting out inefficiency whatever its cause, and to ensuring the highest possible standards of service. I am sorry that we have fallen substantially short of that ideal in this particular case, and I ask the hon. Member for Cheadle to convey to his constituents my personal apologies, and my gratitude for their exceptional patience.

Paragraph 70 of schedule 15 of the Planning and Compensation Act 1991 was enacted by the previous Administration, and gave the then Secretary of State for Transport powers to introduce regulations enabling compensation to be paid in respect of caravans and other mobile dwellings affected by noise caused by public works. The need for special regulations arises because owners of mobile homes or houseboats do not normally have a qualifying interest in the land on which or over which their home is situated.

Without that they are unable first to serve a statutory blight notice requiring the authority responsible to acquire their home, secondly, to ask for their home to be acquired under the discretionary purchase powers introduced by the 1991 Act, and thirdly, to claim compensation under the provisions of part I of the Land Compensation Act 1973. Statutory noise insulation measures such as secondary glazing are inappropriate for mobile homes as they would be impractical and ineffective.

Following commencement of the 1991 Act, the then Minister for Roads and Traffic charged officials in his Department with preparing the intended new regulations for his approval. This reflected the fact that the major source of nuisance to mobile homes arises from the construction and/or use of new or altered highways. Regulations were drafted as early as 1992, but placed in abeyance during more pressing work on preparing and introducing guidelines to implement the discretionary purchase powers that I mentioned earlier.

I know from my briefing for the debate that the hon. Member for Cheadle has pleaded his constituents' case both in writing and in person with the Minister then responsible for roads on several occasions. In June 1996, that Minister gave an assurance that he had asked the Highways Agency, the executive agency responsible for trunk roads, to press on with drafting regulations for his approval and for consultation with local authority associations and other interested parties.

That work appears to have progressed at a disappointingly slow rate—so much so that the hon. Gentleman again found it necessary to make representations, this time to my noble Friend Baroness Hayman, who, in autumn 1997, commissioned the Highways Agency to undertake a public consultation exercise on the draft regulations, which by this time it had prepared.

That exercise, conducted during 1998, took longer than expected and it was not until June 1999 that the agency reported its findings to my noble Friend Lord Whitty and sought his approval to work up a final version of the regulations for his approval. It subsequently took a lot of work on the part of both officials and lawyers to get the regulations to the point at which they were fit to receive ministerial approval, and to iron out the expenditure implications, especially those for local highway authorities, which, along with the Highways Agency, will be required to implement them.

I fear that this has not been a happy tale, but I am delighted to be able to report that it is one that ends on a positive note. I am very pleased to be able to inform the House and the hon. Gentleman that, following completion of final drafting, the regulations have now been signed and approved by my noble Friend Lord Whitty, as the Minister responsible.

As the hon. Member for Cheadle knows, the regulations were laid before both Houses earlier today and, subject to Parliament's approval, we expect them to be brought into force on 23 November. As I know that this is an issue of special concern to the hon. Gentleman and to his constituents at Chesters Croft, I wish to confirm that the regulations have been drafted to provide for retrospective application to 25 September 1990, as intended in the 1991 Act.

The hon. Gentleman also asked how much eligible claimants would be entitled to receive. The answer is that the regulations provide for a flat rate payment of £1,650. That amount is broadly comparable with the cost of noise insulation provided to conventional home owners. The level of payment will be kept under review, but not index linked, because other flat rate provisions in land compensation are not variable.

[Mr. Keith Hill]

Nine years on, the retrospectivity that we are conferring in this case is exceptional, but we are dealing with exceptional circumstances, in which it would be indefensible to penalise those who have been waiting for so long and so patiently to make their claim.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his tireless and ultimately successful campaign on behalf of his constituents, whose long-standing claims will, I trust, be settled at the earliest opportunity.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fourteen minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 2 November 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL

Ordered,

That the promoters of the City of London (Ward Elections) Bill shall have leave to suspend proceedings thereon in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next Session of Parliament, provided that notice of their intention to do so is lodged in the Private Bill Office not later than the day before the close of the present Session and that all fees due up to that date have been paid;

That on the fifth sitting day in the next Session the Bill shall be presented to the House by deposit in the Private Bill Office;

That a declaration signed by the agent shall be annexed to the Bill, stating that it is the same in every respect as the Bill presented in this House in the present Session;

That on the next sitting day following presentation, the Clerk in the Private Bill Office shall lay the Bill on the Table of the House;

That in the next Session the Bill shall be deemed to have passed through every stage through which it has passed in the present session, and shall be recorded in the Journal of the House as having passed those stages;

That no further fees shall be charged to such stages.—*[The Chairman of Ways and Means.]*

Oral Answers to Questions

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Postal Services

1. **Mr. Tony Baldry** (Banbury): How many responses he has received to the draft statutory, social and environmental guidance to the Postal Services Commission. [133887]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): Two.

Mr. Baldry: If the Government intend to place extra responsibilities on the Post Office, those obligations will cost money. How does the Minister think that sub-post offices and rural post offices will make up the third of their income, which they stand to lose in a couple of years? On Report and Third Reading of the Postal Services Bill, the Government said that they might introduce a scheme to help post offices in difficulty. Will any money be paid out under that scheme, or was that just a sop to get the Bill through the other place?

Mr. Johnson: The scheme was not mentioned when we took the Postal Services Bill through the other place. We announced in the comprehensive spending review that we would put £270 million into the initiatives to implement the recommendations in the performance and innovation unit report. We also said that we were prepared to add substantial amounts to that sum because much of it depends on whether the pilots for various initiatives such as Government general practitioners work. If they do so, we can apply them across the country. Money is available, as has been announced clearly in the comprehensive spending review.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Will the Minister ask the Postal Services Commission to examine the terms offered by the Post Office to potential franchisees? Is he aware that in my constituency three post offices have closed and have not been reopened simply because the terms are so unattractive? One of them is the second main post office in the town of Lewes. Similar closures have been made across the country. Those terms possibly represent a greater threat to our post offices than that posed by automated credit transfers.

Mr. Johnson: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. One of the PIU recommendations was that the Government should place an obligation on the Post Office to stop preventable closures. The Post Office does its best at the moment, but it makes the point that that is a purely voluntary action. The report says that the Government should insist that that course is followed as a matter of policy. As part of that, we will ask the Post Office to consider precisely the point that the hon. Gentleman raises—the terms and conditions with which new sub-postmasters have to comply when taking over an office. I hope that the letter that puts the obligation on the Post Office to carry out the PIU recommendation will be available in the House of Commons Library in the next couple of weeks.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): How can the Government talk about social guidance to the Post Office when the Government and the Department of Trade and Industry in particular are vandalising the Post Office network by announcing the end of the cash payment of benefits at post offices? Is the Minister aware of the figures from the Post Office that show that the rate of closure of post offices since the election is running at one a day, and that the rate has been accelerating in recent months? Is he aware of the economic and social damage being caused to those small businesses and their customers in urban areas as well as rural districts throughout the country? When will the Government stop talking about social responsibility and inclusiveness and giving us all that waffle when in practice they are doing the direct opposite by closing the vital network of businesses and post offices on which so many people rely?

Mr. Johnson: That was a frivolous question on a very important subject. I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his turn to be shadow spokesman on trade and industry for the next few months. Let me explain to him that the

closure of post offices is important to all Members of the House. Some 25 per cent. of the network has disappeared in the past 20 years. In 1980 the previous Government—I do not criticise them for it—introduced payment of benefits through ACT for the first time. There was a record number of closures five years later. The Conservative Government extended ACT in 1990. There were record closures—479—again in 1992.

It will be interesting to hear whether the Opposition plan to reverse the move to ACT. We are finally grasping the nettle and are computerising the whole of the network—to date we have computerised 13,000 post offices. The Conservative Government computerised none. The Horizon programme will be finished by February next year and we will build on that to introduce network banking, e-commerce and ideas such as Government general practitioners so as to give post offices a stable and secure future. That future is supported by the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, the Women's Institute and all the societies representing the countryside, including the Countryside Agency. [HON. MEMBERS: "This is a speech."] It is a speech in response to a speech. The only organisation that has criticised that future is the Opposition Front-Bench.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull) *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: The hon. Gentleman will get his chance in a minute.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Perhaps I can be diplomatic by saying that it was a very good question and a very good answer, but both of them should have been shorter.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I wish it had been an answer to the question I actually put. We do not need to be told how important the issue is. The Minister tried to be patronising to me and—by implication—to all the sub-postmasters in the country, whose livelihoods are at stake because of this issue. He then tried to claim that the closure programme was larger under the Conservatives. I remind him that, according to the Government's own figures—I hope that he will not try to deny them—the rate of closure has tripled; it has gone up threefold if we compare the last year of our Administration with this year. The closure rate has accelerated—it is running at more than one a day—and all the Government do is dither. It was we who introduced the idea of wiring up the post offices and the Labour Government who abolished—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am certainly not going to allow a speech—*[Interruption.]* Will the Minister answer the question? *[Interruption.]* The question was far too long. I would say the same to Back Benchers—

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My contribution was not as long as the Minister's.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I made the ruling; it must be shorter. A short reply would be appreciated.

Mr. Johnson: In rural areas, the number of closures at the half-year stage is down by 10 per cent. There is a worrying increase in urban areas, which we are addressing. The provisions of the PIU report will be brought in exactly as the report recommended.

In 1985, there was a record number of 395 closures; it was exceeded in March 1992, when there were 478. That figure has never even been matched under the Labour Government.

Euro

2. **Mr. Michael Fallon** (Sevenoaks): If he will estimate the cost to small retailers of changing over to the euro. [133888]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): The cost to retailers will depend upon the detailed approach that they take to any changeover.

Mr. Fallon: How much has been allocated for conversion preparations in the DTI's own three-year spending plans? When exactly should small retailers begin to prepare?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the importance of retailers preparing for any changeover; that will allow the British people to make a genuine choice as to whether they want to join a single European currency. Only the Labour party offers the people that choice; the Conservatives would not give the British people that choice.

As for costs, that depends on how retailers decide to approach the matter. In the changeover plan, we laid down the precise way in which they can prepare; it will be for retailers themselves to take that decision.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): What benefits does my right hon. Friend anticipate would come from trading in a common currency rather than in different currencies? Does he estimate that those benefits would outweigh the costs of conversion?

Mr. Byers: The Government have made it clear that, in principle, we would join a successful single currency for three principal reasons: the benefits that would come from improved trade; the transparency of costs; and the currency stability that would clearly result from being part of a single currency. Those are the reasons why we are keeping the option open; why we have a policy of prepare and decide; and why we are prepared to give the people of this country a genuine choice—*[Interruption.]* I agree that the Liberal Democrats hold the same position. However, the Conservatives do not; they want to deny choice to the British people—the Conservatives are not prepared to hold effective discussions about the realities.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The cost of changing over to the euro will not be merely a matter of amending invoices and tills. If the exchange rate is fixed, other economic variables—such as labour costs, taxation and prices—will have to take the strain, as the economies of other countries behave differently. Small businesses will feel that strain much more than big ones. What estimate has the DTI made of the extent to which, for instance, an inappropriate interest rate will hurt small retailers or of how much more volatile other economic variables will turn out to be if the European exchange rate

is fixed? How does that climate of much higher risk for small businesses fit in with the Chancellor's five fatuous tests?

Mr. Byers: The economic conditions must be right before we would recommend to the British people joining a single currency, and we have said very clearly that we will test those five economic conditions early in the next Parliament. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the important issue of those important conditions. Unfortunately, he failed to raise the constitutional issues, which I know concern him greatly, which is why he actually said during "Any Questions" on 20 October, "I have no intention whatsoever of voting in favour of the euro". [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear"]. I see that the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), who leads from the Conservative Front Bench on trade and industry matters—I welcome him to his new position—shares that view: he would not vote in favour. I wonder how on earth that can be reconciled with the official policy of the Conservative party?

Conservative Members know that, for principled reasons, they would never support joining a single currency. If that is the principle, and if there are constitutional reasons, why is it not ruled out for ever, and why is there this fudge in the Conservative party to rule it out for one Parliament? Increasingly, people are seeing through the cracks in Tory policy regarding the single currency.

Shipbuilding

3. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): How many people are employed in the United Kingdom's shipbuilding and ship repairing industry; and what was the comparable figure in *(a)* 1980 and *(b)* 1990. [133889]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): The information is not available for the dates requested but it is available for 1981, 1991 and 1998. The data are available only for Great Britain, not the United Kingdom.

In September 1998, the latest year for which data are available, 39,800 people were employed in the building and repairing of ships and boats. In September 1981, 120,800 people were employed in shipbuilding and repairing and the comparable figure for September 1991 was 47,000.

Dr. Godman: I know that the Government are doing their best to stop the dreadful decline in shipbuilding jobs, but might I point out to my hon. Friend that the premature withdrawal of the European Union's operating aid will badly harm the industry and those employed in it? I hope that he will agree to meet a delegation of Members from shipbuilding constituencies to discuss that before the Industry Council meets on 4 December. The aid is not even a pittance when compared with the money given by Brussels to the farming industry, and other European Union member states want to retain the aid.

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We have discussed the matter at the Shipbuilding Forum. It is worth mentioning that, for the first time in the history of this maritime nation, the present Government have created a forum for the industry, the unions and Government to sit around the same table.

It is important to remember that it was the industry itself that agreed to the abolition of the shipbuilding intervention fund by the end of the year 2000, for the simple reason that that fund is disappearing across Europe. Our competition problems are mainly with Korea, where there is a 30 to 40 per cent. difference in prices. The 9 per cent. grants available under SIF are viewed as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

I understand the concerns that my hon. Friend has expressed and I should be pleased to meet a delegation of Members as he suggests.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate that the figures refer only to Great Britain, but we welcome the development of recent weeks, which has given some hope to shipbuilding throughout the United Kingdom. What discussions are going on with the Department for Education and Employment to ensure that we have the trained personnel who can continue the traditions of British shipbuilding?

Mr. Johnson: That is an important point. The problems in the shipbuilding industry stem from many issues, but productivity is central; and the skills of the work force, and ensuring that those skills are kept up to date with new technologies, are crucial. That is why we gave a £2.8 million grant to a link research project, whereby we work in line with the DFEE, whose representatives attend the Shipbuilding Forum that we have set up. We are working with that Department and others to ensure that the industry has the skilled personnel that it needs to face the challenges of the 21st century.

Clothing and Textiles Strategy

4. **Mr. Andrew Reed** (Loughborough): What progress he has made on the implementation of the clothing and textiles strategy. [133890]

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): There is a general consensus that the Government have made much progress on the implementation of those elements of the strategy picked up in the 12-point plan that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), announced to coincide with the launch of the working party's full strategy document. About 50 recommendations are in the report and the rest are being dealt with by a special unit in the DTI.

Mr. Reed: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response and—before I start my moan—I wish to say that it is a welcome document and one for which we have waited 20 years. However, will he recognise the frustration and anger felt by textile workers—particularly those in Shepshed in my constituency where nearly 800 jobs were lost over the summer—at the fact that only £15 million is attached to the strategy when the 6,000 farmers in Leicestershire are entitled to £30 million a year from the set-aside programme to sit on their hands doing nothing? Will he take the message that we cannot wait any longer for the implementation of the strategy

throughout the country—and especially in the east midlands—and that extra resources are required to make things happen on the ground?

Mr. Caborn: I understand the frustration that my hon. Friend feels. The problem is managing change, and 20 years ago we should have set in train a strategy to manage change in the industry so that it could move up the value-added chain to where the worthwhile jobs and the real wealth creation are. The Government want to assist the industry and we have sat down with it to evaluate its problems. We are addressing the issues of improving skills and developing the supply chain to help to ensure that this country exports much more effectively. Unfortunately, that does not happen overnight, but we will work with the industry to manage the change effectively. However, I understand my hon. Friend's frustration.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): Does the Minister accept that any successful textile strategy for the future depends on stable global export markets? Does he acknowledge that the cashmere industry in south-east Scotland still faces a threat of penal United States tariff sanctions in the margins of the on-going banana war? Will his Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office continue—I acknowledge the good work that Ministers have done so far—their efforts to try to bring an early end to the constant uncertainty and threat that hangs over the cashmere industry in Scotland?

Mr. Caborn: I congratulate the industry to which the hon. Gentleman refers. It has increased its sales to the United States from £18 million to £21 million, and that is why it is important to the people who work in the industry that the list on the carousel is not used. In fact, the carousel is a symptom and not a cause. The cause of the problem is the banana war and we are trying to resolve it by exerting strong pressure on the European Commission and the Americans to encourage them to come to an agreement. We would then dispense with the whole carousel. The hon. Gentleman knows that, when cashmere was listed on the carousel, we made strong representations, and that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made them directly. To some extent we were successful, but the listing is a symptom. We must deal with the cause of the problem.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): In my constituency those mill owners who have asked the DTI for help have been very impressed with the quality and speed with which they have received it. Unfortunately, the vast majority of mill owners tell me that that they have never received help from any Government and that they do not believe that any Government are interested in them. How will my right hon. Friend make sure that the textile strategy is understood by mill owners and that they use the strategy that is available to them to help them to export their goods and to ensure that the industry grows?

Mr. Caborn: My hon. Friend knows that the national strategy was developed genuinely within the industry. Therefore, employers are involved. I hope that those who are on the committee developing the strategy represent the whole manufacturing sector in the textile industry. I hope that dialogue is taking place, but if increased communication is necessary in parts of the industry, my hon. Friend can write to me and I will try to address the issues.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Does the Minister agree that manufacturing and retailing consultancy-based projects have not worked? We should direct more resources towards design and technology to achieve the added value to which he referred. Will he have a word with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the possibility of increasing initial allowances so that companies can reinvest in equipment? One machine normally costs about £100,000 and that is a serious problem. In Hinckley in my constituency, companies are considering investing in new equipment, but they think that more should be done to help them to write off that investment in the first couple of years.

Mr. Caborn: All tax issues are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I have no doubt that his remarks will be passed on to my right hon. Friend. The hon. Gentleman is right about training. There must be retraining if we are to increase the value-added element. In that context, the cashmere industry is a model. It has brought in new designers and it is developing the skills base, which has increased the real value-added element in that sector of the industry.

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): Does the Minister recall that the Secretary of State responded to a similarly planted question in June in an equally optimistic manner? To the uninformed, this could almost be a success story. Why does the right hon. Gentleman not come clean and tell the House and the country that since the Government have been in power, more people in the textile industry have lost their jobs than the numbers of those employed in the shipping industry? We discover from the Library and the Textile Institute that 30,000 jobs were lost last year, which is equivalent to 10 per cent. of those employed in the industry. This year, job losses run at more than 17,000 to the end of July. [HON. MEMBERS: "Question!"] Labour Members may not like hearing the truth. When will the Government accept that their handling of the exchange rate, their burdens on business and their stealth taxes are costing jobs in the textile industry, and that there is no other reason for those job losses?

Mr. Caborn: That question shows the shallowness of Opposition Members' thinking. We are trying to restructure the industry, given the legacy of the previous Administration. For the first time for 20 years, we have brought the industry together to examine structural weaknesses. The neglect of the Conservative Administration has led to the redundancies. The industry has welcomed the Government's approach of new thinking, a move into the 21st century and providing real stability for the first time in a long time.

Fibre Optic Cable Companies

5. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What assessment he has made of the impact of the regulatory framework upon the operation of fibre optic cable companies. [133891]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): The Government believe that the current overall regulatory framework provides a sound basis for protecting the environment while safeguarding the legitimate interests of public utilities.

We will continue to promote a high level of investment in the telecommunications department. That is essential for the future of UK business. We are also encouraging the industry to do more to minimise disruption during the laying of cables.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Does he recognise that the majority of transatlantic fibre optic cables have landed in my constituency, with all the associated infrastructure, and that local people see virtually no protection from the Telecommunications Act 1984, which enables the giving of 25-year licences to wave after wave of companies whose cables cross through the area? Does the hon. Gentleman accept that people's lives and livelihoods have been blighted and that the planning system and the landscape have been compromised? Does he accept that there is an urgent need to review regulations that have not kept pace with technological development and commercial exploitation?

Dr. Howells: I readily acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman's constituents have suffered greatly during the process. The Government fully acknowledge the real concerns about the localised but significant disruption that has taken place. We are pressing the industry voluntarily to improve its performance. There are various initiatives within the street works community, including those to encourage best practice and co-ordination within the industry. We shall back those initiatives with greater powers to enable action to be taken where the industry's response is inadequate, particularly by putting in place a charging system for utilities that take too long to carry out street works by implementing section 74 of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): The Minister will know that the change in regulations to the telecommunications industry were taken out of the Utilities Bill when the Government halved their proposals during the Session. A White Paper is coming forward, which has been promised for many years. When will it be published, and when does the hon. Gentleman expect the Government to bring forward legislation to introduce a new regulatory framework for the telecommunications and multi-media industry?

Dr. Howells: That White Paper will be published before Christmas, and we will introduce legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Land Rover

6. **Mr. John M. Taylor** (Solihull): If he will make a statement about his discussions with Ford on their plans for the future of Land Rover. [133892]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): We have regular discussions with Ford covering the whole range of its activities in the UK, including Land Rover. As a result of these discussions, I am confident that Land Rover will continue to build on its existing worldwide reputation, and that it is well positioned to achieve new record levels of production and sales.

The recently announced £130 million investment in the Freelander model is a strong demonstration of Ford's commitment to the brand and to the Solihull plant.

Mr. Taylor: I thank the Minister for that reply. Does he accept that many people in Solihull think that entering the Ford family may be the best thing that could have happened to Land Rover? I draw to the hon. Gentleman's attention Land Rover's training plans—which involve visits to Ford, Volvo and Jaguar sites for about 2,000 members of the work force and are aimed at improving quality and production—and its interesting proposals to give the work force personal off-road driving experience. I invite the Minister to join me in congratulating the company.

Mr. Johnson: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Ford on that initiative.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): My hon. Friend will be aware that Land Rover is supplied with engines by the Powertrain plant at Longbridge, which also supplies engines to MG Rover, and that that plant remains owned by BMW, which has indicated that it may wish to sell it. In the light of what happened earlier this year, will my hon. Friend join me in saying to BMW that as it makes decisions about the future of the Powertrain plant which supplies engines to Land Rover, it should bear in mind the long-term interests of the west midlands and manufacturing industry, and should show that, unlike the Conservative party, it has an interest in the long-term future of the west midlands?

Mr. Johnson: Powertrain indeed provides engines to the Solihull plant. I am happy to confirm the Government's agreement with my hon. Friend that we should seek to keep in the UK as many of those manufacturing jobs as possible. We will watch carefully the situation that he describes.

Small Businesses

7. **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry): What recent consultations he has held with small business representatives on administrative and compliance burdens. [133893]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I meet with small business representatives on a regular basis.

Mr. Boswell: Although there may be some legitimate room for disagreement between us as to the appropriateness and even the cost of the additional regulatory burdens imposed by the Government across the whole of business, does the Secretary of State agree that, at least in relation to the smaller business, whatever administrative burdens affect the bigger business are magnified many times over, and therefore have an entirely disproportionate administrative effect? Has he noticed, for example, the recent alarming escalation in the number of

unfair dismissal claims, and is he not a little concerned about that and all the other problems that small employers and small businesses feel that they are facing?

Mr. Byers: I broadly agree with the general direction of the hon. Gentleman's question. There is no doubt that successive Governments have not done enough to realise the impact of regulations introduced by Government on business in general, and more particularly on small business. Particular demands made on the small business community need to be reflected in our approach. I was pleased that we adopted a different approach, for example, in relation to stakeholder pensions for businesses employing fewer than five people. That will make a real difference. Increasingly, we will need to reflect that more generally in our approach to regulation and related matters.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Will my right hon. Friend give his assessment of the likely burden on business, especially small businesses, if the so-called fuel protesters attempt to repeat the reckless behaviour that they visited on the country in September?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The House should recognise the consequences of the fuel disruption that took place during the second week of September. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who chairs the fuel taskforce, will make a detailed statement on the matter in a few minutes' time: The House should be aware that many businesses, including many small businesses, were in grave financial difficulties and close to going under as a result of the action taken in September.

Whatever the merits of the argument in one direction or the other, it is simply unacceptable that innocent business people trying to create wealth in our country have to risk going out of business because of protests such as those that we saw in September. I hope that all Members will recognise that we can have a genuine debate about the levels of fuel duty and taxation generally, without that leading to support for the disruption that took place earlier in the year.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Can the Secretary of State tell us which of the 23 proposed directives listed in the European social agenda document that the Government endorsed yesterday will reduce burdens on business?

Mr. Byers: Some of them will reduce burdens on business. [HON. MEMBERS: "Which ones?"] The right hon. Gentleman needs to be aware that there is a clear distinction between the Conservative party and the Government. *[Interruption.]* I hope that Opposition Members will listen to this, because the distinction is important. In the Conservative party, "cutting red tape" is code for cutting basic standards in the workplace. When the Tories talk about cutting red tape, they are talking about attacking the national minimum wage. They are talking about attacking better maternity provisions and the right to paid holidays. They are talking about attacking working parents who are trying to balance holding down a job with being a good parent.

We will lift the bureaucratic burden on business, but we will not compromise our commitment to decent standards in the workplace.

Small Business Service

9. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North): What progress is being made in the development of the Small Business Service. [133895]

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): The Small Business Service has been in place for seven months, and is making excellent progress. Largely as a result of its work, the Paymaster General and I can announce today that from April next year the Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise will change the way in which they deal with companies in financial difficulty. They will use Crown preference to help viable companies through a difficult period by sympathetic consideration of company voluntary agreements. Given that 20 per cent. of all compulsory insolvency cases are currently initiated by the Revenue and by Customs and Excise, the new approach will potentially benefit thousands of small businesses, allowing them to overcome short-term difficulties.

Ms Keeble: I welcome that information. I also welcome the recent award of a franchise to the Small Business Service in Northamptonshire, as, I am sure, will the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell).

How will the SBS develop to support small businesses with payroll functions, and how will it deal with working families tax credit and similar important measures introduced by the Government?

May I also ask my right hon. Friend to examine the specific case—which I can refer to him—of one of my constituents who was bankrupted after a VAT inquiry?

Mr. Byers: The new agreements that we are announcing today will be able to respond much more sympathetically to exactly those circumstances. As I have said, one in five actions in compulsory insolvency cases are currently initiated by Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue, but I think that that will change as a result of the new measures.

My hon. Friend mentioned the support that we can give to small business. I think that we shall be able to provide support through working families tax credit, and also through the new gateway that we hope will exist by Easter next year, which will offer practical sensible advice to the small business community.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Will the SBS report to the Secretary of State on the impact of IR35 on professional contractors? Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that according to a recent poll, although 85 per cent. of those contractors may have voted Labour at the last election, only 3 per cent. intend to vote Labour again? Why have he and his Department characterised people who provide a vital service in our economy as tax dodgers, when all they want to do is accumulate money to enable their businesses to grow?

Mr. Byers: I am not sure that those people have been described as tax dodgers. As for IR35, we have always

said that people should pay tax in a fair way, and that is the approach that we have adopted. I am sure that the Small Business Service will talk to those who may be affected by the changes. The service provides a voice for small business at the heart of Government, and I am sure that it will make its views known effectively.

Fireworks

8. **Mr. Phil Sawford** (Kettering): What action he is taking to reduce the number of injuries caused by fireworks. [133894]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): We have jumped backwards now, Mr. Speaker, from question 9 to question 8.

The comprehensive measures introduced under the Fireworks (Safety) Regulations 1997 are again being supplemented by a robust, targeted firework safety campaign.

Mr. Sawford: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he and his Department are doing to reduce the number of injuries caused by fireworks each year. I urge him to consider tighter regulations to restrict sales to organised events only, and thus end the annual ritual whereby hundreds of people suddenly go into their backyards and play with explosives. Every year hundreds of people are maimed and disfigured; sometimes there are fatalities. It is time to take tougher action to reduce those numbers.

Will my hon. Friend consider further restrictions on the availability of fireworks? *[Interruption.]* Just listen. Fireworks are currently let off indiscriminately for weeks before bonfire night and for weeks afterwards. That causes great anxiety, especially to elderly people, pet owners and pet lovers. It is perfectly reasonable for the Government to consider the matter.

Dr. Howells: Obviously fireworks provide a great deal of entertainment for people, because 100 million were sold last year. We would encourage people who are unhappy about buying and letting off fireworks to go to professionally organised displays, but we do not believe that there is a case for a total ban on the retail sale of fireworks. We have legislated to reduce the public's access to more powerful fireworks, but a complete ban could encourage a black market, or lead to people making devices or importing fireworks illegally.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that the 1997 regulations prohibit the supply of fireworks of erratic flight—mini rockets, aerial shells, aerial maroons, maroons in mortar and shells in mortar—does the Under-Secretary agree that before considering the extension of those regulations, which the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr. Sawford) favours, it would be preferable if he could first tell us what evidence he has adduced of compliance with them?

Dr. Howells: As the hon. Gentleman is such a jumping cracker, I am surprised that he forgot to mention squibs. As he knows, the rate of accidents has been decreasing since 1994. I believe that the regulations are working well and that we should keep them.

Miners' Compensation

10. **Mr. Alan W. Williams** (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): If he will make a statement on the latest position as regards miners' compensation claims. [133898]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): With £170 million spent on vibration white finger and £80 million on respiratory diseases, the total payment made by the Government in miners' compensation is more than £250 million. None the less, my hon. Friend is aware of the frustration that I have felt at the slow progress of payment for respiratory diseases. I am therefore happy to report considerable improvements in recent weeks.

More than 400 medical assessments a week are being made, and we should shortly see offers being made at a similar rate. In September, because of my frustration, I introduced a new scheme that provides higher and additional expedited payments. Nine thousand revised offers have been made to date, and we anticipate that in the next couple of weeks, the total will be 19,000 offers, which should amount to some £100 million. That money will be available for the mining communities between now and Christmas.

Mr. Williams: I thank my right hon. Friend for that detailed reply, and for the extra medical centres in Ystrad Mynach and Ammanford in south Wales, which we hope will be up and running before Christmas. Will she consider setting up a new office in south Wales for IRISC, the claims handling arm of the DTI, as there is considerable local demand for one? There are offices in Sheffield and Edinburgh, but a quarter of the claims are made in south Wales. Will she look carefully at the possibility of setting up an office there?

Mrs. Liddell: Certainly I have no problem with the idea of IRISC setting up an office in south Wales. We must do whatever it takes to get the claims processed. It may help my hon. Friend if I tell him that in Wales alone, £24.5 million has now been paid out in compensation, £18.8 million of that for respiratory diseases. However, for us to turn the offers that we are making into money in miners' pockets before Christmas will take co-operation between my Department and the lawyers. The Law Society has today written to solicitors throughout the country inviting them to seminars to encourage them to co-operate so that we can turn our offers into money in miners' pockets as quickly as possible.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I welcome the Minister's comments, and agree that the slow rate of progress on respiratory conditions has been frustrating. Will she particularly bear in mind the coalfields that were closed some time ago, such as those in my constituency in Somerset, where miners are older and suffer from exactly the same conditions, but may not have as easy access to the compensation mechanism?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point which also applies to my constituency, where the mines have been closed for a considerable time. If he requires additional assistance to enable him to keep his constituents informed, my officials stand ready to help. This is a complicated matter and I am anxious that

everything possible should be done to enable us to pay the debt that we owe the miners, whether or not the coalfields are still in operation.

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): My right hon. Friend is aware of the delays to compensation claims—many of which she has addressed, which is most welcome. Some of those delays have been caused by the requirements for evidence under the handling agreement. Much of the evidence dates back to the 1950s and is not immediately available. As a result, many claims have to go through the full medical assessment process rather than qualifying for expedited offers. Is there any way in which we can relax the requirements for evidence in an attempt to make it easier to deal with more claims under the expedited system?

Mrs. Liddell: I very much share my hon. Friend's view. The evidential trail is quite considerable, and I have talked to solicitors with a view to cutting down the requirement for medical records. It may help the House if I point out that many of the miners concerned were working in the coalfields as long ago as 1954, and that some of the medical records are 1,700 pages long. I discussed with the solicitors means of cutting the number of records required, but they made the sensible point that to identify special damages for men who have been seriously affected, there really is a need for access to medical records.

We are trying to move things along as quickly as possible. We are trying to access work histories, and if we cannot do so we will take a statement of truth, with a view to processing claims as fast as we possibly can. I ask everyone involved to co-operate at every level, and I deprecate those who are trying to spread fear about the process. We will pay the miners, but we need co-operation.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The Minister may be trying, but she is not succeeding. Why has she not acceded to the request of her noble Friend Lord Islwyn that she resign because of her incompetent handling of this matter?

Mrs. Liddell: The House will note that there is posturing rather than penitence from the Opposition. The campaign to get compensation for miners started in 1991—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) laughs, but the Government whom he supported turned their back on the miners. We are acknowledging our responsibility to them—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman shouts from a sedentary position—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) wished for silence when he was asking questions, and I ask the same from him. He has a very bad habit of shouting across the Chamber and he will not do so.

Mrs. Liddell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

From 1991, it was open to the Conservative party to acknowledge liability in all those claims. It did not do so, and it ill behoves any Conservative Member to attack the Government for the progress that we have made, with £250 million going into the mining communities that the previous Government sought to decimate.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): I know of my right hon. Friend's great endeavour in ensuring that a legal formula has been made operationally practicable. Prior to her work, that formula did not actually bring miners compensation. She has been an objective force in ensuring that the compensation scheme is extended to cover surface workers. Where do we stand now on the extension of compensation?

Mrs. Liddell: I thank my hon. Friend for his important question. In July the Government fully accepted liability for surface dust, and there is now a technical issue concerning how much respirable dust causes emphysema, and how much dust was breathed. In view of the technical issues involved, the matter should be put to the medical reference panel so that doctors for the Government and for the miners can come to an agreement on the level of surface dust to be taken into account. Acknowledging our liability for surface dust was a major move forward.

Overseas Trade (EU)

11. **Mr. Win Griffiths** (Bridgend): If he will make a statement on Britain's trade within the EU. [133899]

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): The EU is the most important market for UK exports of goods and services and accounts for over 50 per cent. of total UK exports. The EU is also a major source of imports, which widens consumer choice, improves value for money and provides essential components that are then used for exports.

Mr. Griffiths: In thanking my right hon. Friend for his answer, may I ask him to congratulate all those involved in providing exports of goods and services, in which we are moving into a position of strength? Will he confirm that about 3 million British jobs are involved, and will he give further information on a standard planning region basis—in particular, on Wales?

Mr. Caborn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that about 3 million jobs are linked directly and indirectly to exports of goods and services to the EU. I do not have with me the statistics that he requires, but shall provide the information in writing and place it in the Library.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): With how many countries outside the EU is there a favourable trade agreement?

Mr. Caborn: There are a number of favourable trade agreements with countries outside the EU, as the right hon. Gentleman knows. The EU does not debar this country from having trade agreements with other countries, and we are effective in making favourable agreements outside the EU.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Given that we undertake three times as much trade within the EU as we do with the United States of America, does the Minister agree that it would be contrary to our national interest to join the

North American Free Trade Agreement? Does he agree that joining NAFTA would require us to leave the EU, and why does he think the Conservative party are now proposing that?

Mr. Caborn: That is like a number of other red herrings that the Opposition trail across the political spectrum from time to time. When the matter raised by my hon. Friend was studied by the International Trade Commission in Washington, some interesting remarks were made. In a discussion of the UK's possible membership of NAFTA, which had been suggested by some Opposition Members, the ITC said that it would be insignificant for trade, as well as being a political non-starter. That description probably applies to the Opposition as well.

Euro

12. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): What plans he has to encourage the private sector to intensify its preparations for membership of the euro. [133900]

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): The second national changeover plan was published in March 2000.

Mr. O'Brien: The Secretary of State, and now the Minister, have failed miserably to answer the unambiguous questions put by my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) and subsequently by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan). Given that the Department and Ministers have a prime responsibility to account to the House for the expenditure of taxpayers' money, will the Minister identify exactly how much has been allocated in the DTI budget for the expenditure of taxpayers' money on the changeover plan for the private sector, whether to support it or directly to subsidise it? Exactly when does expenditure start—or when is the private sector being advised that it will start—in support of the Labour Government's attempts to scrap the pound?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that the Department's priority at the moment is to ensure that British industry at all levels is able to trade with the eurozone countries, given that the euro is a reality in those countries. To that end, in September I announced the "3 Es" campaign, which concentrates on practical advice on electronic commerce, the euro and exports. The total cost of that campaign is £100,000. It involves the production of 50,000 CD-ROMs and seminars throughout the country, and has been much welcomed by the business community.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not a fact that in areas of the country that depend heavily on the manufacturing sector, large manufacturers are already trading and dealing in the euro? They have to do so if they want to survive in the European market.

Mrs. Liddell: Sensible and prudent businesses are making the necessary arrangements to seize competitive advantage in dealing with the euro—and they are not in any way dissuaded from doing that by Opposition Members' comments.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): We are not talking about campaigns and seminars. If the Minister wants a public debate on the euro, why are she and the Secretary of State keeping secret from the House the cost to the public sector of conversion? The work has been done on that. We know that it has. She does not know the cost to the private sector of converting to the euro. Why will she not disclose the figure for the state sector? What is she hiding?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Gentleman should try to do his homework rather better. If he looks at the preparations for the introduction of the single currency in the eurozone countries, he will find that no eurozone country can yet say what the total cost of conversion will be. I have seen estimates ranging from 0.1 to 0.5 per cent. of GDP. In this country it would be impossible to make a guesstimate, which is what the hon. Gentleman seems to suggest should be done. I suggest that he concentrate rather more on the facts and rather less on rhetoric.

Rogue Traders

13. **Ms Bridget Prentice** (Lewisham, East): What measures he is taking to protect consumers from rogue traders. [133901]

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): We are improving protection against rogue traders in three main areas: through better enforcement of consumer legislation, including e-commerce; by pursuing individual cases that are causing particular concern, such as the servicing and repair of cars; and through the modernising of consumer advice networks.

Ms Prentice: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. I know that he is very much in favour of the market—something for which I have some sympathy—but does he not think that it is time to recognise the consumer as the market? In that light, when is the injunctions directive likely to be introduced? What might its main effects be?

Dr. Howells: I believe that the market offers the best protection for consumers and the widest choice possible, which is better for them, but I am pleased that the injunctions directive will be introduced early next year. It will enable named bodies to take out injunctions in local courts against rogue traders. That will strengthen legitimate businesses and do much to protect vulnerable consumers.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Can the Minister help older people who are preyed on by rogue traders asking to tarmac their drives? They often have no comeback and could not afford an injunction through the court.

Dr. Howells: Yes, indeed. The vulnerable people whom the hon. Lady mentions will not have to take out those injunctions. They can be taken out by trading standards officers or other named bodies. We know, for example, that the Consumers Association has become the named body on the mis-selling of mortgages. We will enable such bodies to seek injunctions in court to stop those gangsters trading.

Aerospace Industry

14. **Dr. Doug Naysmith** (Bristol, North-West): If he will make a statement on the role he envisages for regional development agencies in promoting innovation and investment in the aerospace industry. [133902]

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): Among the statutory purposes of the regional development agencies is the promotion of business efficiency, investment and competitiveness in their regions. In those regions in which the aerospace industry is significant, we envisage a close relationship between the RDA and companies in the sector on those issues.

Dr. Naysmith: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Is he aware of the importance of the aerospace industry not only to my constituency but to greater Bristol, and, indeed, to the whole of the south-west? Is he prepared to say that he will encourage the RDA to support and to encourage not only firms such as BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce, but smaller firms in the supply chain, which need that assistance and encouragement just as much?

Mr. Johnson: I am, of course, aware of the historical importance of Bristol and the south-west in the development of the aerospace industry. It would be perverse if the RDA in that area did not address the very issues that my hon. Friend has raised. As a result of our support for the A3XX, we expect 22,000 new jobs to be created and 62,000 existing jobs to be safeguarded. That is a very important development for manufacturing industry in this country.

Fuel Contingency Planning

12.31 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the contingency arrangements being put in place in the event of further blockades of fuel or other essential supplies.

The background to these arrangements is the severe disruption to fuel supplies which occurred between 7 and 14 September.

Since the protests, a large number of meetings with outside bodies have been held by Ministers across Government to discuss the concerns over fuel prices, in particular as they impact on the farming and haulage industries which are already facing major structural problems. Indeed, prior to the protests, there were many such meetings and in the March Budget, as well as ending the fuel duty escalator, in place since 1993, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer cut vehicle excise duty for the haulage industry and for smaller vehicles.

In the past few weeks, Ministers in various Departments have held numerous meetings with organisations campaigning about the high cost of fuel. These include the Road Haulage Association, the Freight Transport Association, the Fuel Forum, the People's Fuel Lobby, Farmers for Action and the Disabled Drivers' Association. In addition to setting up the fuel taskforce, we have also held a number of meetings with oil company representatives, the trade unions and representatives of the food and other industries affected by the protests. And Ministers have also visited all the main fuel refineries and depots to talk at first hand to the tanker drivers, to company managers, to the police and to others about the lessons to be learned from the protests in September.

As a result, I think that no one can fairly say that we have not made every effort to listen to people's concerns, and of course in the days that remain before the Chancellor's statement, we shall continue to do so.

Let me now explain to the House why it is so important to make proper preparations to protect people, industry and services so far as possible against further disruption.

The United Kingdom now has the fourth largest economy in the world. Employment is at record levels and inflation is the lowest in Europe. But, as with all modern economies, fundamental changes in the way in which we live and work, and all the just-in-time arrangements, increase our vulnerability to those determined to cause disruption.

Whatever the motives of those involved, the disruption that took place in September very nearly caused serious damage to our economy.

The British Chambers of Commerce has published details of the effects of the disruption on the commercial activities of its members across the country. For example, in St. Helens, it reported that more than a quarter of businesses lost orders, 6 per cent. laid off staff and a third predicted a long-term impact on sales. In Peterborough, almost four in 10 firms reported that they had suffered lost sales and 16 per cent. said that they had had to close temporarily. Many other companies suffered financial problems and lost orders. The British Chambers of Commerce concluded from its research that if the protests had "persisted for much longer" they would have caused severe damage to many firms from which some would not have recovered.

That conclusion has been endorsed, among many others, by the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress.

Later today, I shall be placing in the Library a report summarising information available to Departments about the impact of the disruption.

The blockades also disrupted essential public services. At some blockades, the protesters sought to excuse the impact of the disruption by letting through supplies which they had judged to be essential. However, there are literally millions of people who perform functions without which the health and other essential services would grind to a halt—from nurses, doctors, hospital receptionists and cleaners, to volunteers delivering meals on wheels, cooks, telephone operators and, of course, the patients themselves. They all needed fuel, yet their needs were barely recognised by those who were at the terminal gates.

It is therefore not from any desire whatever for confrontation—*[Interruption.]* It is not out of any desire on the Labour Benches for confrontation—which we still seek to avoid—but because of our responsibilities as a Government to the country as a whole that we must now make preparations to minimise the risk of that happening again.

So, following the September events, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister asked me to chair a fuel taskforce to help ensure that Government, industry and others were better prepared to ensure a continuity of supplies for the future. The taskforce included Ministers and representatives from the devolved Administrations in Scotland and in Wales, police, the oil industry, trade unions and others. It has met on four occasions. Its members first agreed a memorandum of understanding, which committed all concerned to work together to ensure continuity of oil supplies.

The arrangements include plans to direct fuel supplies to a limited number of designated filling stations and to give priority to essential users. We have upgraded arrangements to ensure that local authorities and other priority users are better prepared for any future disruption. As I told the House in a written statement last week, and as my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces repeated on Monday, we have asked the Ministry of Defence to train military drivers to help drive tankers should such assistance prove necessary; but that would be very much as a last resort. Preparations have also been made to help to protect food depots, to keep major roads open and to protect potential targets other than oil terminals.

There has of course been a lot of debate about whether intimidation of drivers took place. It could well be that some drivers were sympathetic to the aims of the protesters. Many of those who were involved in the protests were intent on acting lawfully and peacefully, and did so. Peaceful protest is an important right in any properly functioning democracy. It is a right that I regard it as one of my first duties to defend, as do the police. However, the behaviour of some of the protesters did create a climate in which the managers and the drivers themselves judged that it was unsafe to allow normal operations to continue.

[Mr. Jack Straw]

Along with ministerial colleagues, I have spoken to a large number of the tanker drivers involved. Those whom I met told me of a real sense of fear that they felt about driving in the face of threats of intimidation and of physical attack. I am placing in the Library of the House a detailed log of 180 incidents of intimidation recorded by the oil companies and amended only to avoid identifying publicly the drivers involved. That picture of intimidation is confirmed by the Transport and General Workers Union, whose members form a substantial majority of the drivers concerned.

Tactics of intimidation are unacceptable in any circumstances, but particularly so against the driver of an oil tanker in personal charge of many thousands of litres of highly explosive fuel. Police and the oil companies have therefore drawn up detailed plans better to safeguard tanker drivers from the threat of intimidation and better to ensure that the tankers can move freely on to and along the highway. Tanker drivers have the right to go about their daily business in security and safety. Ensuring that is a central aim of our preparations.

Let me repeat that the last thing that the Government want is any kind of confrontation. There will always be people who hold strong and opposing views on many issues—including, today, what to do about oil prices, the problems affecting farmers and the difficulties affecting the road haulage industry. Peaceful protest can and does play an important role in drawing such concerns to the attention of Government and of Parliament. It is then for us in Government and Parliament to make choices.

I hope, however, that the whole House will join me in saying that no one has the right to instigate the kind of disruption that we saw in September, and still less to threaten the disruption now being prepared. We have already heard public threats to blockade not only the fuel supply but food distribution depots. The consequences of such disruption are obvious, and they would hit the weakest and the most vulnerable first. There can be no justification for any such action, and it is opposed by every employers' organisation and trade union and by established hauliers' and farmers' representatives.

The measures that I have outlined today should ensure that the Government, industry and our health and other public services are better prepared to cope with the sort of direct action that we witnessed in September, but real risks will remain if people persist in protesting in an extreme and irresponsible way. Those now seeking further disruption must understand that their demands could not be met without great damage to jobs and industry, to essential services, including the national health service, to pensioners and to children. We all have responsibilities.

Whatever the supposed Budget surplus—and some figures being mooted are wildly exaggerated—Government action is necessarily limited in three ways: it must be consistent with keeping interest rates, and so mortgages, at their present low level; it must not prevent us from taking action to support pensioners who also need help; and it must not change the absolutely essential programme of investment in key public services, in schools, hospitals, transport and the police, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in July.

The right to argue, to complain and to protest is an essential feature of our democratic society. Preventing law-abiding people from going about their business, and threatening the well-being of the country, is not. I hope that the whole House will join me in support of the measures and of the approach that I have outlined today.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I thank the Home Secretary for that statement. I feel obliged to observe that for the second time he has failed to deliver to the Opposition a copy of the statement in reasonable time. The conventions of the House— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady must have a hearing.

Miss Widdecombe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The conventions of the House, which are there for the purpose of calling the Government to account, suggest that the Government should give statements to the Opposition at least 30 minutes in advance of delivery. We received this statement little more than a quarter of an hour before it was due to be made. *[Interruption.]* The mood of the House indicates the defensiveness on the Government side. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. Caplin, you must be calm.

Miss Widdecombe: The Opposition will support all measures that are reasonable and sensible to keep the economy moving, to keep food in the shops and fuel in the pumps and, above all, to keep the emergency services in action. Nevertheless, is not the real reason for any impending fuel crisis this arrogant and out-of-touch Government's refusal to cut fuel taxes? Is it not the case that, having reached the top of the escalator, they simply refuse to get off? Is it not the case that they have such limited experience of filling up a petrol tank for themselves that they have no idea of the effect on ordinary, hard-working families? I assume that the Home Secretary's driver fills up his tank and carries the can for that.

The Government have caused this crisis by their refusal to listen to the hard-pressed people of Britain or to the consistent warnings of the Opposition. Will the Home Secretary say now, simply and straightforwardly and in words of one syllable, whether he accepts that fuel tax is too high? Is not the Home Secretary stoking up a crisis by advocating panic buying and stockpiling? Presumably to divert attention from his failures, is not the right hon. Gentleman attempting to scare the nation with the ghost of this Government's credibility?

Is the Home Secretary aware of the statements made by several police forces across the country, and by Sir John Evans on behalf of the Association of Chief Police Officers, that the previous protests were overwhelmingly peaceful? The right hon. Gentleman makes large claims about intimidation and violence, but the police organisations have said that

there was a good working rapport between police commanders and the pickets

and that

the impression among police officers was that the protest was peaceful.

We can sort this out right now. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House how many people have been arrested or prosecuted for violence during the pickets?

Will he say whether hauliers who engage in peaceful protests have been or will be threatened with the removal of their operating licences? Have special branch officers been used to spy on fuel protesters' meetings? If so, was the right hon. Gentleman aware of it, and did he authorise it?

Will the Home Secretary tell the House how many drivers are being trained by the military for the emergency? Will he largely be using members of the Territorial Army? If so, does he not see the supreme irony that many of those troops who are trained Army drivers will in civilian life be tanker and lorry drivers, and that they will therefore be paid by the taxpayer for doing a job that they would have been doing anyway? I want the exact figures—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I cannot hear the right hon. Lady. I must be able to hear her.

Miss Widdecombe: I accept that he may need a bit of notice before he can produce them, but I want the exact figures from the Home Secretary on the number of regular drivers being trained, the numbers of Territorial Army personnel involved, and the numbers of those personnel who are lorry drivers in civilian life.

Will the Home Secretary comment on the fact that the list of designated petrol stations dated from the time of the Gulf war, 10 years ago? As a result, many of the stations designated were closed or were inadequate. Is not the right hon. Gentleman responsible for that? What is he going to do to rectify the matter next time?

This time, will the Home Secretary also designate for priority vehicles which transport people with disabilities for essential purposes? He did not do that last time. Disabled organisations say that the fact that those vehicles were not designated last time caused real hardship. I should be grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's confirmation that those vehicles will be so designated if that is necessary this time.

On behalf of the Opposition, I urge protesters not to resort to unlawful action, but rather to use the ballot box to get rid of this lying, cheating, arrogant, stealth-taxing Labour Government.

Mr. Straw: I seem to recall that Sir Winston Churchill once observed, "If you have a weak case, shout." The more the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) ranted, the less convincing her case became. As someone who has dined out for years on moral absolutes, her equivocation on this issue will be as unconvincing outside the House as it was inside it.

Let me deal with the points that the right hon. Lady raised. First, I am sorry that the statement was delivered late. My understanding was that she received it at 12.10 pm. The former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), was very good about ensuring that, whenever possible, I received statements well in advance. However, as the right hon. Lady knows—and she often places this on the record—I have sought whenever possible to give her sometimes even more notice than I was given in opposition. She often has three or four hours in which to read documents. There were good reasons why the detail of the statement could not be delivered to her until 12.10 pm.

The right hon. Lady spoke about the Opposition's persistent warnings that fuel taxes were too high. Her recollection must be very different from mine. The previous Government introduced the fuel duty escalator in March 1993 and increased it from 3 per cent. to 5 per cent. in November 1993. At the election, at which they stood with such spectacular results—for us—they boasted in their campaign guide about the way in which they had increased the fuel duty escalator. The shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said in this place that the fuel escalator was intended to raise revenue. The same right hon. Gentleman said to Sir David Frost in July of this year, when asked whether he would definitely reduce the tax on petrol:

> Well . . . I . . . I'm not getting into the business of guarantees.

I do not know what "persistent warnings" we were given—until the Leader of the Opposition saw a passing bandwagon and jumped on it.

The right hon. Lady asked me about whether the protests were overwhelmingly peaceful last time. I have already said that many protesters acted lawfully and peacefully. When will we hear unequivocal condemnation from the right hon. Lady and the Leader of the Opposition of the fact that some of the protesters went way beyond the bounds of peaceful protest, and that there was intimidation? There is no way that she and others can deny the truth of that—the log shows it.

The right hon. Lady asked about operators' licences.

Miss Widdecombe: What about arrests?

Mr. Straw: The number of arrests is well known. I think it was about two. When action is plainly unlawful—for example, in areas of high crime, where equal intimidation takes place and where witnesses are intimidated—the Opposition are normally the first to say that the police should have made more arrests, not fewer, in the face of that evidence. Yet in the face of 180 separately recorded instances of disruption, the right hon. Lady seems to be saying that it is a good thing, not a bad thing, that few arrests were made.

The right hon. Lady asked about operators' licences. Of course, if hauliers conduct themselves peacefully, there is no threat to their operators' licences. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] Well of course that is true. If they conduct themselves in a way that breaches the law, however, there may be a threat to their licences.

The right hon. Lady asked me about special branch. She was a Home Office Minister, so she very well knows that there are no circumstances in which a Home Secretary will tell the House which actions of particular groups are being investigated by law enforcement agencies. I have two things to say to her: I have ensured that all the law enforcement agencies properly observe the strictly laid down requirements of the law, and I shall continue to do so.

The right hon. Lady asked how many drivers in the Army had been trained for possible use. I understand that up to 1,000 have been trained, and that they are regular members of the armed forces.

The right hon. Lady asked about designated petrol stations—

Miss Widdecombe: What about territorials?

Mr. Straw: I have just said they are regulars. There is a difference between regular soldiers and territorials.

[Mr. Straw]

The right hon. Lady asked about designated petrol—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) has already asked about the territorials. She cannot shout about them while she is sitting down.

Mr. Straw: I do my best with the right hon. Lady, Mr. Speaker.

The right hon. Lady asked about designated petrol stations. We drew up a list and, because it had to be done quickly, it contained some inaccuracies. We have taken steps since to ensure that the list of those that could be used in the event of further disruption is more accurate. The right hon. Lady asked about people with disabilities. I understand the point, and I have to say that the disabled suffered disruption to their lives not because of action that we took, but because of actions taken by people whom the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) has described as "fine upstanding men."

The right hon. Lady accused us of being out of touch. I do not want to intrude on her private grief within her own party, but I am tempted to do so. When it comes to being out of touch not only with the country but with the Conservative party, the right hon. Lady takes first prize for what happened at her party conference. Before she tries to extract the mote in other people's eyes, she might look at the beam in her own eye.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has visited the Stanlow site with me and is aware that the main artery roads, including those in surrounding villages, are in a major hazard zone. Will he confirm that if there are repeats of the activities that occurred on the nights of 7 and 8 September, everything will be done to remove any blockade that impedes the access of emergency services? The people who took that action were subsequently described as "fine upstanding men", but included some who said that they did not care if Stanlow blew up. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that such action does not happen again, and will he condemn anyone who supports such activity?

Mr. Straw: I wish to record my personal thanks to my hon. Friend for the action that he took as the protests became more substantial. He worked overnight with the police to try to ensure some semblance of supply from the major terminal at Stanlow. On the removal of blockades, my hon. Friend and I held discussions with Shell, the oil company that operates Stanlow, and with Cheshire police. Much effort has been made to ensure that, while people should be able to protest peacefully, they cannot take blockading action as they did previously. My hon. Friend will appreciate that operational decisions are a matter for the chief constable and his constables, and are not a matter for the Home Secretary or any politician.

Of course I condemn the utterly irresponsible statements that were made by some of the protesters at Stanlow. The fact that people, or perhaps only one person, spoke about not caring whether Stanlow blew up underlines the fact that we are dealing not with some inert, safe load and product but with a highly explosive product. For that reason, the oil companies, their managers and the drivers have all worked commendably within a safety culture. That has to be taken into account when making a judgment about whether it was reasonable for the drivers, in the face of those threats, not to drive.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement. There will not be any equivocation from the Liberal Democrat Benches. The Government have a duty to protect the liberty of the protesters, but they equally have a responsibility to protect the liberty and safety of people going about their proper jobs as drivers and employees of the oil industry. They equally have a duty to make sure that essential supplies can get to their destination so that the country is not disrupted by any protest more than any other. It is important that, although fuel protesters should be able to put their case, the country remembers that there are equally those who believe that fuel prices need not be reduced, and that they have a case. We should also remember that pensioners, who may not have lorries, tractors and mobile phones or the ability to mobilise, have just as much right to have their case heard by the Government as the people who just shout more loudly sometimes, whatever the merit of their case.

Will the Home Secretary confirm his responsibilities? Can we take it that his Department will co-ordinate the operation and that all the information that people need will be obtainable from one central place, namely, the Home Office? Can we take it that there will be no confusion this time about where the supplies can be obtained or about who the priority users are, which was clearly a muddle earlier in the year? Can we take it that the Government will have an education campaign to tell people not only how to respond but how to use fuel less and be less fuel-dependent, so that we have a strategically sensible policy followed by the public as well as the Government?

May I check that the right hon. Gentleman agrees that, just as we have to deal with people who, under the guise of being football supporters, are professional troublemakers, we should be equally tough on people using the fuel dispute to be professional troublemakers? Will the police deal with far left and far right groups just as ferociously and ensure that they do not distort the debate?

The Home Secretary said nothing about when the emergency measures would end. Is there a timetable, and how will the House hold the Government to account for how they are carried out?

Mr. Straw: There is scarcely a need for the hon. Gentleman to say that his party has not equivocated on this issue, because that is on the record. I thank him and his colleagues for being able to distinguish between might and right. People have different opinions about fuel prices. It was not until the protests started that the Conservative party changed its view. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish!"] Conservative Members say that it is rubbish. I am sorry that they are not getting the point; so let me repeat it. On "Breakfast with Frost" on 16 July this year, the shadow Chancellor, when asked whether he would give a guarantee that he would reduce the tax on petrol, waffled for a bit while he thought of an answer and then said:

> I'm not getting into the business of guarantees.

That is the fact of the matter. Words to that effect were repeated, even in the days leading up to the protest. Only after they had seen the bandwagon did the Conservatives decide to offer the 3p cut in fuel duty.

On the issue of co-ordination, I am the responsible Minister. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I chair the civil contingencies committee. It would fall to me to make reports to the House on co-ordination in respect of public safety. If there is trouble of the kind that took place on the previous occasion, the arrangements would be physically sited not in the Home Office but in the Cabinet Office, because that is the best place in which to co-ordinate them.

The hon. Gentleman asks that there should be no confusion next time. We shall do our best to reduce the lack of clarity that existed in certain circumstances previously, but we cannot guarantee that no difficulties will arise—precisely because we cannot fully anticipate the exact nature of the disruption. However, during the past seven weeks, we have, of course, tried to learn lessons from the disruption that took place.

The hon. Gentleman asks about priority users. I understand from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry that a list will be published later today.

I accept the hon. Gentleman's point about education. However, we must acknowledge that the arrangements that we could set up in an extreme situation could not guarantee continuity of supplies at their current levels—as I have already made clear. Supplies would be significantly reduced.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned professional troublemakers—I exempt the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald from that term. However, I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that she and her right hon. and hon. Friends continue to exhibit extraordinary equivocation.

The hon. Gentleman asked when the order would be renewed. The Order in Council obtained from Her Majesty by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on—I think—8 September has to be renewed before 19 November. It will, I understand, be subject to debate in the House.

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): On behalf of all sensible people, I welcome the measures announced by my right hon. Friend. When he next meets representatives from the oil companies, will he remind them that more than three quarters of this year's increase in the price of petrol and diesel resulted from the increases imposed by the companies, and that the ensuing profiteering has been amply demonstrated by Shell's announcement today of profits for the previous quarter that have risen by 80 per cent., compared with those for the same quarter last year? Will he remind the companies that that is all the more reason why the people managing the terminals and depots should make a much better effort than they made in September to ensure that supplies get through? If they do not, the people of this country will think that the companies are incompetent as well as greedy.

Mr. Straw: There have been intense discussions on co-operation with the oil companies—in almost all of which I was involved—to ensure better arrangements for the future, if they are needed. I am certain that we shall enjoy the full co-operation of the companies.

As for the profits made by the oil companies, I am sure that representatives of all the oil companies will be listening to this debate and to the comments of my right hon. Friend. It is for them—not for me—to explain the level of their profits.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): As the Government are in receipt of a huge windfall benefit—largely as a result of increased petroleum revenue tax receipts—which was quite unforeseen at the time of the Budget, why do the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues persist in advancing the completely false argument that they cannot cut fuel duty without affecting their spending plans?

Mr. Straw: Coming from the right hon. and learned Gentleman, the shift in his party's position is quite extraordinary. Of course, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will take account of the revenues available to him. He always does so—as does any prudent Chancellor. However, I think the right hon. and learned Gentleman understands that—as I explained in my statement—my right hon. Friend has to take many other factors into account, including the effect of any changes in revenue levels on the overall level of demand and, as a result, on interest and mortgage rates.

I also have to say to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that he cannot get out of the box that the Opposition are now in on taxing and spending. It was not in March that the shadow Chancellor accused us of excessive spending plans; that was as late as late July, when he said, with the full support of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, that the spending plans of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which have provided for substantial increases in investment in education, health, transport and the police, amounted to a splurge. The clear implication was not that we should increase spending but that we should cut it.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Can my right hon. Friend tell me at what point the police underwent their dramatic conversion on all these bosses' blockades, when they changed the attitude that they had displayed in all the strikes and picket lines that I went on, and became all touchy-feely and sensitive to the people on the refinery blockades? Will he also bear it in mind that some of us believe in the language of priorities in relation to spending? Will he convey to the Chancellor of the Exchequer that, now that he has built up a surplus, we do not want an education on how to spend it from people who were experts in building up a deficit?

Will my right hon. Friend listen to me, because I have played a part in building up this surplus? Will he bear in mind—and tell all the fuel protesters—that next week we want more money for the health service, which has given many of us a second mortgage on another life? We want more money for those regional areas where they shut the pits and we need more employment. And we need more money for education. If there is anything left in this surplus—I hope that there is a big chunk—we want the rest of it for the pensioners. When my right hon. Friend

[Mr. Dennis Skinner]

has done all that, he should remember the old adage that you can only spend the money once, and then tell the fuel protesters, "We've spent it all."

Mr. Straw: I commend my hon. Friend for the prudence that he has just shown. Of course he is right; this is about priorities. We cannot spend the money twice and the Government have to make choices—sometimes very difficult choices. One of the many things that has led members of the Conservative party completely to exclude themselves from the prospect of responsibility in government is their pretence that this money can be spent twice over, as well as their record, as my hon. Friend says, which was not about creating surpluses—except in the late 1980s, when they splurged a surplus, with disastrous consequences for this country. During the period when this lot—these people—were holding ministerial office, there was no surplus and we ended up with a deficit of, I believe, £28 billion.

Let me deal with the point that my hon. Friend raised about methods of policing. Many people have said to me, "The police did not act as swiftly as they did in the miners' strike."

Mr. Skinner: You bet they didn't.

Mr. Straw: I tell my hon. Friend that no more than he did I approve of the tactics of the previous Government—many of those tactics in respect of the miners' strikes. There are also many police officers, who are now in senior positions in the police service, who at the time were very uncomfortable about actions that they felt they were asked to undertake.

In my judgment, the police deserve congratulations on the careful and proportionate way in which they sought to police these actions. These are decisions that they must take, and are not for me. I place it on the record that everyone—the media, the Government, the police and many others—did not anticipate the speed and scale with which the disruption took place, but in a matter of days arrangements were put in place with the police to ensure that their policing was proportionate to the problems, and that every effort was made to reduce the disruption.

The police have assured me, given what we now know and the serious threats being placed on the record about future disruption not only to fuel supplies but to food supplies and other essential supplies in our society, that they will take appropriate action to deal with it.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): In his discussions with senior police officers, did the Home Secretary remind them that secondary picketing is unlawful and that, even when picketing is allowed, there must be no than six people involved at the place of work, because numbers of people can be intimidatory? Has there been close liaison between the police and the Transport and General Workers Union on how drivers will be looked after if—and we hope that this does not happen—there is any form of the trouble that we saw last time?

Mr. Straw: Secondary picketing raises an interesting question. Had it been an industrial dispute, the law, as it now stands, would have meant that employers and the police would have been able to take action in respect of the protests outside the terminals. Because it was not an industrial dispute, the police were constrained at the beginning in the action that they felt able to take.

I am sorry that I did not quite hear the hon. Gentleman's second point, but I think that I picked up its gist. He asked whether arrangements are being made between the police, the oil company management and the drivers better to secure the drivers' safety in the event of protests. The answer to that is yes.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): May I say first that I hope that my right hon. Friend's plans will never be put into action? I represent a constituency that contains Grangemouth, Scotland's only refinery. When I talked to the protesters, they said that they wanted to get round the table with the Government and their leader, Robert Burns, said that that was the sensible approach. We have heard today that that has happened, and only the most irresponsible of truck drivers and the most irresponsible of politicians would say anything other than that there should not be another protest.

May I ask my right hon. Friend specifically whether he has talked to the media? When I visited Grangemouth on Tuesday 12 September, I talked to the people on the picket line and they seemed to be very reasonable about talking to the Government. When I returned on 13 September, I found more than 500 ordinary citizens and their children blocking the road to the refinery. The television cameras had broadcast an appeal by one of the so-called leaders of the protests for people to come to the refinery to join the blockade. A mêlée went on till after midnight on 13 September. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the media do not broadcast stupid messages from the protesters if that brings out ordinary citizens to what they think is a jamboree? As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) pointed out, such places are dangerous zones where tankers with thousands of litres of fuel in them pass up and down. Such appeals are irresponsible and we must ensure that the media do not allow what happened to take place again.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before the Home Secretary replies, may I point out that we must have brief questions? Otherwise some hon. Members will not be able to take part.

Mr. Straw: I shall try, Mr. Speaker, to give brief answers.

Yes, we have been speaking to all the representatives of the peaceful protests outside the refineries and to many others. However, whatever the media reported, some people took unlawful action to blockade access and egress to terminals. I have not had any discussions with the media about how they report the events, and I do not intend to do so. It is a matter for them.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): How dare the Home Secretary accuse my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and Conservative Members of jumping on a bandwagon? His memory is at fault. I had an Adjournment debate on

11 November 1998 on the issue, and Conservative Members have consistently voted against every vindictive increase in fuel duties—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I do not want to hear about voting records. I want a short, sharp question from the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Paterson: I bitterly regret that this issue has not been sorted out in Parliament. Should the Government continue with their policy and a crisis be provoked, will the Home Secretary provide a telephone or fax number to which Members of Parliament can address urgent requests from constituents for help? During the previous crisis, I faxed Downing street about a very urgent issue and received no—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I call the Home Secretary.

Mr. Straw: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not receive details of the designated line that we set up for Members. We shall seek to set up another one. I am sorry that I missed the hon. Gentleman's Adjournment debate. What I have quoted in relation to the shadow Chancellor's attitude is accurate.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Would not hauliers do well to reflect on what would happen if beer drinkers blocked the breweries and the motorways because they wanted to pay less duty; if smokers blocked tobacco plants and the motorways because they wanted to pay less duty on cigarettes; if peace campaigners blocked the motorways because they wanted to avoid paying tax towards the defence industry; and if environmentalists blocked the motorways because they thought the hauliers should pay more tax? There would be chaos. It is a matter now of who runs Britain.

Mr. Straw: With those graphic questions, my hon. Friend illustrates that there are limits to protests. Protest must be peaceful and—

Miss Widdecombe: We do not condone law breaking.

Mr. Straw: I am glad to hear that from the right hon. Lady. She should be saying that rather more clearly than she has in the past.

Of course there are limits to peaceful protests. As for who runs Britain in a democratic society, it is a matter for Parliament and government. It is a matter for Parliament, through the ballot box, in reflecting the will of the people. There are many ways in which people can democratically express either their support for or opposition to the Government of the day. I celebrate, support and defend those avenues, but blocking motorways is not one of them.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I ask the Home Secretary for further reassurances on the number of designated filling stations in rural areas, especially in west Wales, which is at the end of the distribution line. I had only one such station in my constituency. Unfortunately, it had closed four years ago. The one 200 yards down the road could not obtain fuel because it was not on the designated list. My information is that emergency services in west Wales were within one and a half days of collapsing. Can the right hon. Gentleman assure me, even at this late stage, that rural areas and west Wales will be looked after with designated fuel stations?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that many people in rural areas were particularly badly affected. Along with the north-west, my region, Wales was perhaps the worst affected part of the United Kingdom.

As the hon. Gentleman may know, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales, has been heavily involved in discussions. I pay tribute to him and his colleagues for all their work to ensure that we are fully apprised of the needs of Wales, particularly those of rural areas. We are ensuring that the list of designated filling stations will be much more accurate than previously.

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): I understand my right hon. Friend when he says that the Government do not seek confrontation. However, sometimes some people need to be confronted. It is unacceptable that the leaders of so-called fine upstanding men should be allowed to stand outside the House in an anti-democratic and anarchic fashion and threaten the lives of people by the protests that they intend to make. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that when they have the despicably entitled Jarrow march—they are as ignorant in their understanding of history as in their understanding of democracy—the police will not fail to ensure that they are arrested and that the courts will take the full panoply of the criminal law into account when anyone disrupts our civilised society?

Mr. Straw: On the particular point that my hon. Friend raises, as I have made it clear, operational decisions are a matter for the chief officers of police and their constables, and they operate, properly and necessarily by law, independently of Ministers or the police authorities. I can also tell my hon. Friend that of course the police are taking account of all the known threats and are adjusting their plans accordingly.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Having had some experience of protest and of endeavouring to ensure that the protest was peaceful, I agree with what has been said. Intimidation, violence and threats damage the case of those who want fuel costs reduced. I ask the Home Secretary to bear in mind the fact that tremendous frustration exists. There is serious frustration in Northern Ireland, where hundreds of millions of pounds'-worth of tax due to the Exchequer is not even being collected, because of the fraudulent operations that go on there. Will the Home Secretary give some assurance today to those who have made representations to Government that the Government are listening?

Mr. Straw: The Government are listening. I spelled out in my statement many of the meetings that Ministers across Government have held with representative organisations. Of course, my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland have taken particular account of the points that the hon. Gentleman makes about cross-border smuggling, not only of petrol, but of other material.

[Mr. Straw]

The hon. Gentleman will understand that, yes, we are listening carefully, but in the end, because no Government could properly accept all the demands made on them without bankrupting the country, there will have to be choices, which the Government present to Parliament and on which Parliament will have to make its own decisions.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Has my right hon. Friend had a chance to see a website called www.fuel-protest.com? If he has, he will have noticed links to the Countryside Alliance, the British National party, the UK Independence party, the Hauliers and Farmers Alliance, the Road Haulage Association and others. He will also have noticed that on the website, which is claimed to be the legitimate voice of the fuel protesters, it is stated:

> This may look like a "mere" fuel protest, but it's really about who rules Britain ... Whatever your reason for opposing Blair, this is your chance to join the people like you doing something about it.

Does my right hon. Friend think that the internet is being misused, and that, in the light of the content, which is racist and attacks asylum seekers—those genuinely seeking immigration into Britain—much of the fuel protest is being hijacked by extremist and right-wing groups?

Mr. Straw: I have indeed seen the printout of that internet site. I do not for a moment suggest that a majority of those who were involved in the protests in September share the views shown on the site; perhaps a very small minority do. What is on that site is revolting. As my hon. Friend says, it is straightforwardly racist in its tone. To some extent, we must all be concerned about the company that we keep.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The Home Secretary rightly spoke about the damage that would be done to business and industry by a protracted period of fuel protest. Does he also acknowledge that if the Government persist in having the highest fuel taxes in Europe, the life will be squeezed progressively out of British businesses, especially small businesses, and the Government's policy will do enormous damage to business, as it is doing to the budgets of ordinary families who have to pay such high fuel taxes?

Mr. Straw: If the hon. Gentleman wants a debate about relative tax burdens between the United Kingdom and Europe, he cannot isolate fuel prices, even for the haulage industry. He must look at the tax burden as a whole. Thanks to the magnificent way in which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has managed the economy, we now have employment at its highest level, inflation at the lowest level in Europe, and one of the lowest tax burdens of any country in Europe. A few weeks ago *The Sunday Times* stated that whereas our tax burden was about 37 per cent., that of Europe as a whole was about 44 or 45 per cent.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that fuel protesters' claims to be protecting emergency services rang very hollow when essential supplies did not get through to hospitals? My local hospital told me that it would have begun to run out of essential supplies within a few days.

Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning the moral equivocation of the Opposition, who seem content to put the care of sick people at risk, and will he assure me that essential supplies will be protected in the event of further protests?

Mr. Straw: Yes—and those claims did ring hollow, because the protesters set themselves up to arbitrate on what was and was not an emergency service without understanding that, in a modern society, people who do not carry a card saying "I work for an emergency service" may nevertheless have an essential part to play in such services.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement, but will he assure me that the body he chairs will give proper weight to environmental considerations? The statement did not mention the word "environment". Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that, while hon. Members have ranted about the need for lower fuel prices in recent weeks, my constituents have been dealing with unprecedented floods whose severity has undoubtedly been caused by global warming to which vehicle emissions have contributed?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman referred to the civil contingency arrangements body which I chair. Although my responsibilities as Home Secretary are wide, I am happy to say that they do not include direct responsibility to the House for either tax policy or environment policy.

Of course we understand that many communities, not least those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, have been severely affected by flooding in recent days and weeks. My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister take that very seriously. Yesterday I attended a meeting, led by the Deputy Prime Minister, with all the local authority associations. Among other things, we discussed how we could better help areas such as that represented by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Why can we not designate fuel an essential commodity like gas, electricity and water, and place a legal obligation on oil companies to ensure continuity of supply?

Mr. Straw: As my hon. Friend may know, discussions have taken place in the taskforce about whether the legal framework in which oil companies operate should be changed. It has not been possible to reach conclusions in the short time that we have had so far, but when conclusions are reached they will be reported to the House.

As for a change in the law, our problem was not a breach of obligation on the part of oil companies but a breach of civil duty—civic duty—on the part of the protesters, who went beyond the bounds of peaceful protest and sought to stop the delivery of essential supplies. In some areas, they succeeded.

Electricity, gas and water are delivered without the use of road transport, whereas about 60 per cent. of oil supplies depend on road transport at the last point of delivery.

Business of the House

1.33 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I will announce the business for next week.

MONDAY 6 NOVEMBER—Opposition Day [19th Allotted Day].

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate on pensioners followed by a debate on privatisation. Both motions will arise in the name of the Liberal Democrats.

TUESDAY 7 NOVEMBER—Motions relating to the modernisation of the House of Commons.

WEDNESDAY 8 NOVEMBER—Remaining stages of the Trustee Bill *[Lords]*.

There will be a debate on the ninth report from the Trade and Industry Committee on proposed public-private partnership for BNFL. The debate will arise on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

THURSDAY 9 NOVEMBER—Debate on the first report from the Liaison Committee on Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 10 NOVEMBER—There will be a debate on sport on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

MONDAY 13 NOVEMBER—Opposition Day [20th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Motion on the Energy Act 1976 (Reserve Powers) Order 2000.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for the remainder of November will be:

THURSDAY 9 NOVEMBER—Debate on electronic conveyancing.

THURSDAY 16 NOVEMBER—Debate on fishing safety.

THURSDAY 23 NOVEMBER—Debate on a Select Committee Report. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 30 NOVEMBER—Debate on a Government topic. Subject to be announced.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the forthcoming business. Why has she tabled a guillotine motion on today's Order Paper for Tuesday's business? The motion will require the House to conclude its deliberations at 8 pm. As we have heard, that business is important to hon. Members and to those who take an interest in our constitutional proceedings. It seeks to require us, after the Queen's Speech, to curtail most of the votes that take place after 10 pm, which will be rounded up into one vote on a Wednesday. It also seeks to limit the time that we will be able to spend in future on debating Government legislation.

Why will such an important debate be curtailed at 8 pm? Does it have anything to do with the interesting and attractive invitations that many hon. Members have received to party next Tuesday night away as the American election results come in? Will the debate be curtailed to allow Labour Members to stomp at the Savoy instead of carrying out their duties to the House and the people whom they represent? Given that the motion stands in the right hon. Lady's name, I would be grateful if she would carefully consider changing her mind. Conservative Members want to scrutinise and debate such an important matter fully.

On Thursday we shall debate the Liaison Committee's report on Select Committees. The right hon. Lady said on a previous occasion that there would be a free vote on the matter, yet the House is to be denied a vote altogether. Despite representations, the debate is on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. I ask for the debate to be on a substantive motion so that all hon. Members can express their views in the Lobby.

Will the right hon. Lady also consider allowing time for debates on two subjects about which hon. Members from all parties are concerned? The first is the position of the fire and rescue services around the country as a result of the radio spectrum auction which the Government have proposed. It will require them to change at great expense the systems that they currently use for radio communications. Arrangements have already been made for police forces around the country. The matter is now urgent because fire and rescue services have been given no suggestion about how they are expected to fund the considerable increase in costs that the auction will impose on them.

Notwithstanding the ten-minute Bill that was discussed this week, there are many letters about stem cell cloning in hon. Members' postbags. Will the right hon. Lady find time for a fuller debate on that important subject?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady first asked about the arrangements for the debate on Tuesday. Let me correct her, if I may. We have not tabled a guillotine motion, but a business motion, which is commonly tabled. Its timing will allow more than half a day for debate. *[Interruption.]* From the noises off, I can tell that Opposition Members do not often attend such debates. It is more time than we spent debating the parliamentary calendar and as much time as we spent debating whether we should set up the experiment in Westminster Hall. There is therefore nothing unprecedented about the time allowed for the debate.

Secondly, the hon. Lady asked me why the decision was taken. We anticipate that there may be a number of debates. She may be aware that one of her right hon. Friends has already tabled some 10 amendments, at least some of which he may wish to press to a vote. The hon. Lady suggested that it was because Labour Members might want to party the night away. Such remarks are most unwise. The last occasion on which I recall the House being kept up disruptively for a considerable time was when Conservative Members wanted to attend a dinner and the debate was prolonged until they came back. so it is always wise to be cautious about raising these parallels. Half a day for debating such an issue is perfectly normal and absolutely in line with all the precedents. We have made time in the hope that we can dispose of the business as expeditiously as is perfectly normal and efficient.

Thirdly, the hon. Lady asked me about the business on the Liaison Committee. Again, there is a precedent. If we look at debates on the Procedure Committee report, for example, as far back as 1990, 1994 and 1996—all under the previous Government—the precedent is for such matters to be discussed on a motion for the Adjournment.

[Mrs. Beckett]

The hon. Lady asked whether there would be a free vote. I am always extremely careful about what I say about that, and I can tell the hon. Lady precisely what I said on every occasion when the matter was raised. All votes on House matters are free votes. That is what I said and those are the facts. I am astonished that the hon. Lady is in any doubt about that and that she and her right hon. and hon. Friends keep asking me about it every time we have a business statement.

The hon. Lady also asked about fire and rescue services. I shall undertake to make some inquiries for her. My recollection is that the matter was much debated when the spectrum option was being discussed and when the legislation was being prepared, but I will of course draw her remarks to the attention of my relevant right hon. and hon. Friends in case they have anything to add. I also take on board her request for discussions about stem cell cloning. We shall certainly bear it in mind and perhaps discuss it through the usual channels.

Angela Smith (Basildon): As we move towards the anniversary of the gunpowder plot on 5 November, it may not surprise hon. Members that many people will be celebrating this weekend. May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 1088:

[*That this House calls for a ban on the sale of fireworks to the general public.*]

At the moment, it does not have many signatures. It may be that hon. Members do not agree with the motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle), but there is a great deal of concern among our constituents about the nuisance, disruption and injuries caused largely because of the sale of ordinary fireworks to the public. Is it not time to reconsider the option of restricting the sale of fireworks, as many of our constituents are being disturbed and troubled by the illegal use of fireworks?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the point that my hon. Friend is making. There is concern if fireworks are used disruptively, and public safety is always a worry at this time of year. Although of course I share my hon. Friend's sympathy and concern for those who find these things distressing or who are in any way injured, the Government have again looked carefully at a review that was carried out by the previous Government about the possibility of banning the sale of fireworks to the general public. There remains concern that were we to do so, a black market in these goods might develop, or it might lead to some people producing home-made devices, and that would be even worse. We keep the matter under review, but I cannot undertake to act as my hon. Friend wishes at present.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Is the Leader of the House aware of the considerable difficulties that some hon. Members had in reaching the House on Monday? Will she consider carefully what steps are in her power to take, in consultation with you, Mr. Speaker, should the same happen next Monday? To illustrate that, let me draw her attention to the fact that at one stage on Monday my only route to the House appeared to be to fly to London City airport via Jersey, with no guarantee that the second half of the journey would take place. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] I managed to make it here.

The Leader of the House will be aware that similar problems involving public transport in general could arise if the statement that the Home Secretary has just given is repeated in future as the result of another fuel blockade? In such circumstances, attendance in the House will be unrepresentative, as it will consist of Members whose constituencies are close to the House, such as London Members. In those circumstances, what powers are available to the Leader of the House, in consultation with you, Mr. Speaker, to change the business of the House at short notice?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I am aware that many colleagues experienced difficulties, although, as he will have observed, many overcame those difficulties. The hon. Gentleman did not put it like this, but I understand that, had he travelled via Jersey, he might have been tempted not to complete the second half of his journey.

Any Government keep those matters under review because, in any winter, there are times when there are problems for Members. Of course, the matter is significantly one for Mr. Speaker, as well as the Government when dealing with the business. We shall keep these matters under review, but the hon. Gentleman will accept that, after last week's experience, Members will be mindful of the need to make satisfactory arrangements to try to attend the House.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Mr. Speaker, I take this first opportunity to extend to you and your family my warmest congratulations on your much deserved elevation to the Chair.

I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the case of a 10-year-old constituent of mine, young Owen Roberts of Gibbonsdown in Barry in the Vale of Glamorgan, who broke his arm very badly eight weeks ago. His mum was unable to get medical attention or to get him to hospital for nearly 24 hours as a direct result of the actions of the so-called fuel protesters. In the light of evidence to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry about the high level of threats and intimidation, will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate in the House to assess accurately the effects of the protest?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the difficulties that many members of the public experienced, and I trust that the whole House is sorry to hear of the pain and difficulty experienced by a young constituent and the undoubted distress felt by any parent in those circumstances.

My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the effect of the disruption on people's lives. No matter how hard those engaged in such disruption try to minimise the effects on, for example, essential services, there will always be difficulties that cannot be overcome. I recognise that there were few arrests, as Opposition Members pointed out. It is generally held that much of the action that is now being described took place out of sight of the police, but I hope that even Opposition Members will not challenge the accuracy of statements being made, not by the Government but by oil companies and tanker drivers about the problems that they experienced. I hope that no one in the House supports such action.

I fear that I must tell my hon. Friend that I cannot find time for a special debate on the matter, but I am confident that it will continue to be aired here.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May we have an urgent debate on Monday entitled "The Suffocation of the House of Commons" so that we can highlight the arrogance of the Government and, I regret to say, the Leader of the House in seeking to cut short the debate on the curtailment of debates in the House of Commons in perpetuity? That would also allow us to highlight the fact that the Liaison Committee's report to the Government and the House, which recommends proper accountability of Government, is being hidden away. Indeed, the Government will not even allow it to be voted on.

Those are serious matters and must not be allowed to slip by without the House being given a proper opportunity to discuss in a full day's debate without time limit the fact that we are about to end all possibilities in the House for proper Government accountability and opposition.

Mrs. Beckett: I see no point in having an urgent debate on Monday about something that will be debated on Tuesday. As for the notion that, in some way, it is improper to discuss whether we should programme our business better, I remind the right hon. Gentleman that there are those on his Benches who have long advocated such moves; that the matter was raised in the Jopling report; that that was also supported in the House; and that, only this week, the Hansard Society has published a report making a number of recommendations, of which the first is that all parliamentary business should be timetabled in precisely the way that the Modernisation Committee has proposed. The right hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled to say that he believes that all those who advocate that view are wrong, but he cannot, in those circumstances, be correct in saying that it is a unique example of the arrogance of the Government and the Government alone.

The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the Liaison Committee report. Again, that is not being hidden away. It is being debated in accordance with precedent on a motion for the Adjournment. As for whether it will be voted on, Members can vote on a motion for the Adjournment if they choose, and do so from time to time.

Much has been said about the issue of a free vote. On any House matter, there are free votes on the Labour side. It is not clear from what the Leader of the Opposition said about the Liaison Committee report whether there is any intention to have a free vote on that on the Conservative side.

To finish on the right hon. Gentleman's first point, he asks why we do not have a debate on the suffocation of the House of Commons. I concede that no one is better fitted to lead it than him.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): The Leader of the House will be aware that there was a half-hour debate yesterday in Westminster Hall on Saint-Gobain's takeover and proposed closure of Biwaters, which would lead to 700 jobs being lost in the constituency that I represent. She might not be aware that that debate left many questions unanswered and many other issues in dispute.

May we have a wider debate to allow us to discuss the powers of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry under the Fair Trading Act 1973 to refer mergers to the Competition Commission, and to discuss what is considered to be a material fact in that case? We were informed that it was not a material fact that there were proposals to close Biwaters. That seems to a number of us to be incorrect and should be considered by the House. There is an important matter to pursue.

I raised the issue last week and the Leader of the House said that she would have a word with the Prime Minister about the petition that was sent by my constituents to Downing street. I wonder whether anything followed from that.

Mrs. Beckett: To take up my hon. Friend's last point, of course that was drawn to the attention of the relevant authorities. I fear that I have not come armed with the answer. To return to his first and later points, I know that he has on a number of occasions raised the problems being experienced at Biwaters by his constituents and pursued them assiduously through all the channels open to him. He now makes a different, although equally legitimate, point about the role and powers of the Secretary of State. It is an issue that could be separately explored. Again, my hon. Friend might like to use the opportunities that he has already used in raising the specific issue of Biwaters and the problems that have arisen there. However, I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate in the House on the subject in the near future.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Can the Leader of the House find time for an early debate on preliminary views on the Phillips report, given that the criticisms in that report are more trenchant than the rather cosy exchanges last week might lead the outside world to believe? Furthermore, will she ensure that there is sufficient time when the Freedom of Information Bill returns to the House for a Government amendment to extend the scope of the Bill to scientific advice provided to Ministers—an amendment that the Government have so far resisted in both Houses?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. Again, it is open to hon. Members to seek to pursue opportunities to secure their own debates on those matters, but I can only confirm what my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said last week: it is the Government's intention to have a debate on those matters, but we feel that it would be better for the House if that took place when the Government were in a position to highlight their initial response to the report. I understand the anxiety to have earlier debates, but, considering it is a 16-volume report and my right hon. Friend urged people to study the whole report, the Government would be reluctant to stage a much earlier debate, although, as I say, it is open to the hon. Gentleman and to his colleagues to pursue the matter.

As for the issue of the Freedom of Information Bill, no doubt that matter, too, will be raised when the Bill returns to the House, but I can only repeat that the Government have striven to get a sound and workable balance between

[Mrs. Beckett]

putting as much information as possible into the public domain, and not jeopardising the proper and sensible operation of government.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I thank my right hon. Friend for finding time next Wednesday for a debate on BNFL as it relates to the report from the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. However, would she consider that if the debate had taken place this Monday, we could have debated the urban and rural White Papers from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions? Can she find time—probably, after the announcement of the urban and rural White Papers—for a full debate on those important matters?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Those matters are not yet before us, but I shall certainly bear his remarks in mind.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the right hon. Lady find time for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to make a statement on last night's Herbert Morrison lecture, which he gave and in which he said that Labour had exaggerated what was possible in its first term of government and that one of the key lessons of that first term was

the need not to over-claim . . .?

He also said that members of the Government were

all a bit guilty of letting some of our sense of the possible get out of sync with the pace of change on the ground.

There are hon. Members on both sides of the House who would feel that, in the case of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, that is an example of confession being good for the soul.

Mrs. Beckett: I have heard only brief reports of the speech to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I am not clear to what extent my right hon. Friend is being quoted directly and to what extent a spin is being put on what he said.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Can my right hon. Friend find time for the important debate that the House needs to hold on global warming? We have seen some of the consequences of global warming lately—the recent floods. There have been many examples, both in this country and abroad, of changes in weather patterns, which are disastrous for many people. We need to debate global warming to find out what the Government—and, indeed, the British people—can do to try to tackle that ever increasing problem.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. In recent days and weeks, it has become increasingly clear that we are experiencing some of the more severe weather that people have long predicted. My hon. friend will know that investment in flood defences has increased—by a further £30 million for capital schemes in the spending review this year. The investment will now be some £267 million over the next three years. I believe that he has experienced problems in Arnold in his own area. I hope that the resources that are being made available will be of assistance, but he will know that those problems will take some time to overcome.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): If it is true that, on Tuesday, many hon. Members will be enjoying themselves following the American presidential and congressional elections, could it be that those elections actually mean something precisely because the Select Committees in Congress are so powerful? Will the right hon. Lady therefore accept that Thursday's debate on our Select Committees is vital? I know that she wants to help the House, but can she make it clear that we shall have an Adjournment debate in which Members can express their general opinions, after which there will be substantive motions amendable with a full free vote so that all Members can exercise their conscience? That is an important issue, and I know that she will want to help the House.

Mrs. Beckett: There are substantial differences between the Committees in the American Senate and Congress and those that exist here, but the hon. Gentleman will have noticed that that does not necessarily lead to greater voter interest and identification, because the turnout at elections in America is substantially worse than in this country. I do not draw a logical connection between the two matters; I simply make the point that his case is not necessarily made by what he says.

The hon. Gentleman requests a debate on the matter because it is so vital. I agree that it is vital and very much hope that all Members who take part in Thursday's debate will have read the report and that they will have given serious thought to its recommendations. I do not dismiss the report lightly; it is very serious indeed. If it were to be brought into effect, it would have profound implications and profound consequences for the House, not least for the standing and role of individual Members.

I was saddened to see the Leader of the Opposition appear to respond in a knee-jerk manner to something that he hopes the Government would dislike. The report has grave implications for the House, Ministers and Back Benchers alike, regardless of who is in government. It is also a matter on which I know that there were strong opposing views among Opposition Members. I hope that we will not see those views stifled.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your election. This is my first opportunity to do so.

Could we have another—but full—debate on the situation in the middle east? Although there was a debate on it last week in Westminster Hall, events are moving very fast. In the light of the very welcome agreement between Nobel prize-winner Peres and Nobel prize-winner Arafat; of signs that it may be possible to get back on the path of negotiations, which would be very welcome; and of the concerns expressed to me by many of my constituents who are worried about a spillover into this country of conflict in the region, could we have an early debate to reaffirm our support for peace, negotiation, dialogue, compromise and the overall Oslo process?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot offer an early debate on the issue, although I accept—I think that the

whole House accepts—its importance and timeliness. Fortunately, however, we have Foreign Office questions on Tuesday, and my hon. Friend may find an opportunity to raise the issue then.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): When can we have a debate on the growing crisis in medical general practice? In Dorset, and particularly in my constituency, general practitioners are finding that they are not allowed to exercise their clinical freedom to prescribe the drugs that they think are best for their patients because their budgets are subject to rationing. Additionally, primary care groups are taking unlawful sanctions against general practitioners, depriving them of their staff budget, if they do not reduce the service that they provide to patients. The situation is desperate. People who are entitled to receive the medicines that their doctors think are best for them are being deprived of those medicines because of the Government's budgetary constraints—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that the House has got the point.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has exposed the flaw in his argument by his own remarks. The budgetary constraints being experienced in the health service under this Government, are nothing compared with those that were experienced under the previous Government, and, indeed, they are being substantially improved. As for the constraints issue itself, I think we all understand that there are genuine difficulties in striking a good balance between the most efficient use of moneys, particularly in prescribing, and the required level of clinical freedom. For those who were not fundholders, the level of clinical freedom that the hon. Gentleman describes did not exist under the Government whom he supported.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I was very disappointed by the reply that the Leader of the House gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) on his request for a debate on the middle east crisis, because it is a desperately serious situation. On Monday, on television, the Israeli Foreign Minister said that he supported the concept of an independent Palestinian state. Meanwhile, however, he was unable to say why Israeli forces were continuing to occupy the Palestinian areas and to fire on protesters, including large numbers of unarmed young civilians.

The situation has enormous implications for events in the middle east as a whole, and there is a danger of other nations becoming involved in it. Obviously, we all hope that the Oslo peace process is resumed and gets back on track, and that we end up with a ceasefire and—I hope—an independent Palestinian state existing alongside the state of Israel. However, does not my right hon. Friend think that we could do a bit more than simply raise the issue at Foreign Office questions next week, and have a full and serious debate on the crisis?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a series of important points. As he said on the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes), there is no doubt that it is a difficult situation, and that the whole House hopes that recent developments signal an easing of the difficulties. However, although he is right to identify that there is a difference between having a debate in the House and Foreign Office questions, the latter will provide an opportunity for the issue to be raised and aired. I also recommend to him the extra opportunities for debate in Westminster Hall, where I understand that there have been a number of more specific but also very well-attended and very good foreign affairs debates.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): Does the Leader of the House understand the anger that is generated when she announces business that will mean the most revolutionary changes in the procedures of the House, certainly in my lifetime, and then tells us that she will decide how long we can debate those changes? Surely the debate should continue until everyone who wants to speak has spoken. Anything less is an abuse of the rights and privileges to speak on such matters bestowed on Members of Parliament by our constituents. Will she reconsider her position, because I do not think that she would wish to be guilty of such an abuse?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I sympathise with the concern expressed by Opposition Members, but the notion that these are the most revolutionary changes that have taken place in the hon. Gentleman's lifetime makes me doubt whether he has been paying attention these past 20 years.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Ministry of Defence is conducting an inquiry into the possibility of making ex gratia payments to the former far east prisoners of war. Can we have a debate on the issue on the Floor of the House? There are only about 7,500 of those ex-POWs left now. They are men who endured the most brutal treatment at the hands of their Japanese captors. Is it not about time that we put right what the Tories neglected for 18 years? They never cared about the POWs, the pensioners or all the people who sacrificed so much in the defeat of fascism. It is about time to put matters right, have a debate and get the payments made.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand and sympathise with my hon. Friend's wish to remind the House of what he properly describes—no one in the House would dissent—as the terrible suffering experienced by those to whose war record he refers. I fear, however, that I cannot find time for a special debate on that matter, especially as at present we have had and are having a number of defence debates.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must move on. I will take note of those who were patient and did not get called.

Points of Order

2.7 pm

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. In exchanges at Prime Minister's Question Time yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition cited what he described as new figures in relation to the share of national income taken in tax. It has come to light today that they are not new figures. In fact, they are very old figures and do not even take account of the 1p reduction in income tax, the 10p rate of income tax or the working families tax credit. Have you had a request from the right hon. Gentleman to make a statement withdrawing what he said yesterday?

Mr. Speaker: These are matters for debate. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can take them up with the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Are we sure it is a point of order?

Mr. Bruce: Yes.

I do not know whether you have yet had a chance to read the 17th report of the Standards and Privileges Committee, dealing with declarations of interest during debates in the House. You will know that the Commissioner upholds what we all understand to be the rule. The Committee seems to discount the fact that we have a rule whereby if there is any likelihood of an interest being involved in a speech, hon. Members should declare it at the beginning. Will you please study the rules and the report and advise the House on how you think that hon. Members should deal with this matter? The report directly criticises the Chairman of the Committee, who is effectively saying, "Well, the rules don't apply to me and perhaps not to anyone else in the House."

Mr. Speaker: The rules and the report are a matter for the House. It is a matter for the right hon. Gentleman how he conducts himself.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Earlier this week, there were some scandalous revelations about the state of affairs at the mortuary at Trafford general hospital, which serves my constituents. The state of the mortuary is a disgrace, the likelihood of infection being spread is apparently great, and so far there has been no sign of anything being done. I communicated with the Secretary of State for Health on Tuesday, to ask him to make an urgent statement on the matter. Has he indicated his desire to make such a statement and reassure people who are concerned about the state of the mortuary?

Mr. Speaker: The Secretary of State has not contacted me.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. With regard to the earlier point of order about the Chairman of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), I understood that it was part of the traditions of the House that a Member who intended to make an attack on another Member would inform that person first.

Mr. Ian Bruce: He has.

Mr. Savidge: Thank you.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I fully appreciate that you said you had noted those hon. Members who did not get called during business questions, but I wish to repeat the point that I raised last week—that junior Members of Parliament have only once chance every week to ask questions that are of crucial interest to constituents. I know that you have had a lot to think about in the past two weeks, but would it be possible for you to plan to allow a little more time for business questions?

Mr. Speaker: It is possible that I could allow more time for business questions, but the hon. Gentleman must understand that he was called to intervene during the preceding statement by the Home Secretary, and he spoke for too long. That delayed the Leader of the House getting to her feet, so the fault lies with the hon. Gentleman.

First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means

Ordered,

That Mrs. Sylvia Heal be First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.—*[Mrs. Beckett.]*

Defence and the Armed Forces

[Relevant documents: Second Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 158, on the Ministry of Defence Annual Reporting Cycle, and the Government's response thereto, HC 452;

Fifth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 100, on the Defence Geographic and Imagery Intelligence Agency, and the Government's response thereto, HC 629;

Eighth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 264, on European Security and Defence, and the Government's response thereto, HC 732;

Thirteenth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 433, on the Iraqi No-Fly Zones, and the Government's response thereto, HC 930;

Fourteenth Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1999–2000, HC 347-I, on Lessons of Kosovo.]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [1 November], That the House do now adjourn.

Question again proposed.

2.11 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): May I begin by expressing my pleasure at the elevation of my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (Mrs. Heal) to the post of First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means? My only regret is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence will thereby lose a first-class Parliamentary Private Secretary.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State opened the debate yesterday by running through some of the main activities in which our armed forces have recently been involved. Our armed forces have proved time and again why they are the envy of the world. Before I speak about some detailed matters in that regard, I want to turn to the role of defence in the community.

The presence of the Ministry of Defence and our armed forces at the heart of the community is often felt most keenly when they are on hand to help when things go wrong. The armed forces have been much in evidence in the last few days, helping the civil authorities to deal with the consequences of floods and storms. We have provided personnel and vehicles to assist in Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire, Kent and Somerset. We have also provided specialist teams to deal with chemical leaks, and helicopters to carry out reconnaissance flights. We did much the same when flooding hit Kent and Sussex last month.

The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force provide search and rescue services around our coasts 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and rescued 1,189 people last year 1999. Our bomb disposal experts received 495 call-outs last year, and the armed forces were on standby to ensure that essential services did not break down during the recent fuel crisis.

Hon. Members know from the answer that I gave in the Chamber on 30 October that the Ministry of Defence is fully engaged in the fuel task force's efforts to ensure that the effects of any future disruption to fuel supplies are minimised. As before, that includes being prepared to help distribute fuel, as directed by the civil authorities, to help keep the country going. The House has already had the opportunity to hear the statement from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

However, we do not want people in Britain to see members of the armed forces only in emergencies. We want them to meet our service men and women, and we hope that they will therefore learn a bit about the vital work that they do all over the world. During the summer months the Royal Navy carried out the "Meet Your Navy" deployment around Britain. This was a highly successful programme of visits to ports and harbours around the country, as part of the national millennium celebrations.

In all, 26 naval units were involved, including a submarine and a royal fleet auxiliary. They were visited by 58,000 members of the public. Highlights included the first port visit by an aircraft carrier to Bristol for many years, and the deployment of a Royal Navy patrol craft to Wisbech in Cambridgeshire—the furthest inland that a commissioned vessel has been in recent times.

Before I move on to the Government's policies for people and for logistics, I want to comment on the anti-European obsession displayed by Opposition Members in yesterday's debate. The Opposition are well known for their visceral fear of all things European. Their dogma on Europe means that they reject co-operation in Europe, even when that would be in the national interest.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Rubbish.

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman says, "Rubbish," but we know that he and the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) have relatively progressive views on Europe. That must make for very interesting meetings among the Opposition defence team.

In view of those obsessions, we should not be surprised that they also surface in defence matters. It might be possible to overlook the view of Lord Tebbit, expressed in the *Mail on Sunday*, that we should buy "tried and tested" United States aircraft instead of the "expensive" and "already obsolescent" Eurofighter, but that view is also the policy of Conservative Front Bench Members.

Lord Tebbit's successor in the Chingford constituency, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), told the House last Thursday that

> multi-nation collaborative programmes remain a serious problem . . . European procurement strategies . . . run the risk of creating a fortress Europe and alienating others in the NATO alliance.

The hon. Gentleman also said:

> Often . . . the best happens to be the USA.

That will be news to the hundreds of thousands of workers employed in our defence industry. The hon. Gentleman was not shy about telling the House which national collaborative programme was in his sights. He said:

> I have some serious concerns about the A400M . . . I had some deep concerns when he—

the Secretary of State—

> announced it . . . To be fair to all those concerned . . . we should tell them whether we are certain that the project can seriously go ahead.—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 439-441.]

The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green may not be aware that the A400M will create 3,400 long-term, skilled jobs in the UK, primarily at Filton, Broughton and Prestwick. If indirect employment is included, that figure could rise to more than 10,000 jobs. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take this opportunity to give those involved in the A400M a categorical

[Mr. Spellar]

assurance: would a Conservative Government match this Government's commitment to the A400M programme, yes or no?

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Minister is talking rubbish. I asked whether the Government would go ahead with the project regardless of its cost or of the problems associated with it. The Minister cannot get away with putting other questions in my mouth. He should answer the questions: is there a problem with the A400M project? If so, will the Government go ahead with it regardless?

Mr. Spellar: The project is moving well, and we are in very useful discussions with our partners. We very much welcome the project.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Would not adopting a policy of "US is always best" be a stab in the back for UK manufacturers who, for example, are trying to sell Grippen aircraft in central and east Europe, against stiff US competition?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend is right, and those manufacturers are facing some very rough tactics from that competition.

Why are hon. Members who represent Chingford so dismissive of our successful aircraft industry? The Eurofighter and A400M projects may not matter in Chingford, but they do elsewhere—in Bristol and Derby, in Yorkshire, in Scotland and in Wales. They matter too in the north-west of England, and especially in Preston. The attitude of Opposition Front-Bench Members will be noted very carefully by those who work in the industry.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Spellar: No. I now want to speak about what the Government have done to improve logistics support. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green last week acknowledged the real progress being made in that regard. That is crucial to our forces' ability to fight and win. Training and equipping our forces, and getting them to a crisis, is not enough: we need to be able to supply and sustain them, and to do so as cost-effectively as possible.

The Defence Logistics Organisation has been up and running since April 1999, when the three single service logistics organisations were successfully merged under chief of defence logistics General Sir Sam Cowan. I am grateful to the tribute that the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green paid to the chief of defence logistics last week. The DLO provides logistic support across the board—involving everything from guided missiles to ration packs—and spends nearly £5 billion a year.

Bringing together logistics functions under the DLO provides an opportunity to capitalise on economies of scale and to conduct a much wider rationalisation than could ever have been possible under three separate logistics organisations. This allows us to release more resources for investment in front-line capability.

The DLO's strategic goal is to achieve a 20 per cent. reduction in output costs by 2005. To do that, it has established an innovative business change programme. The key benefits of the programme include a smaller, leaner, single defence inventory shared with industry; a reduced number of direct suppliers, consistent with best commercial practice; the maximum application of e-commerce and e-business, and a focus on the reduction of through-life whole support chain costs, rather than buying equipment simply on the basis of the lowest acquisition prices.

The first priority of the DLO remains the provision of logistic support to the armed forces. That has continued uninterrupted throughout the transition to the new organisation and alongside these major business changes. The new arrangements have been tested—and found to work well—in operations in the Balkans, Sierra Leone and elsewhere.

An important element of the strategy for the DLO is a closer relationship with industry. It therefore gives me great pleasure to announce the signature of a partnering agreement between the Defence Aviation Repair Agency and Rolls-Royce plc to provide best practice integrated logistics support for military engines in service with the armed forces. Under the agreement, both partners will work together to achieve a joint optimum balance between capability and capacity. Both sides will have full visibility of all relevant data and the benefits to each partner will be linked to its respective contribution and performance. This is a ground-breaking industrial initiative which I hope can be replicated with other major equipment suppliers.

This is not the only fruit of the new unified approach to logistics. For example, we have created a defence munitions group which has brought all service munitions together into a single operation, eliminating duplication in the inventory and providing the opportunity to reduce overheads. In addition, the rationalisation of the naval bases and supply agency and the ship support agency into a single organisation, to be called the warship support agency, from April next year will deliver cost and operational benefits in the management of support to front-line ships.

We have also set up the defence catering group, which now provides a single focus for food supply. [HON. MEMBERS: "Stew!"] This builds on the excellence that already exists in our armed forces. A joint service team of chefs has just won the European gold medal, and silver overall, in the Culinary Olympics in Germany, beating all other European comers. This is not the first time that the quality of British military cuisine has met with the approval of other nations.

There were some interesting asides from Conservative Members about stew. That is the traditional, old-fashioned view of the provision of catering in the armed forces, but it has changed dramatically. It shows how out of date Conservative Members are. Hon. Members may recall that earlier in the year, when the SFOR headquarters at Banja Luka became multinational, our NATO allies asked if we would continue to do the catering for all countries, to which we happily agreed.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the Minister confirm that those Army caterers were trained in Aldershot?

Mr. Spellar: Not only that, but I suspect that they have probably recently used the excellent sporting facilities that

I know the hon. Gentleman has visited, built on time and to price, as an excellent part of smart construction. They are extremely good facilities which are—to answer the hon. Gentleman's question of yesterday—part of our continuing commitment to Aldershot.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Will the Minister also give a commitment to farmers in the Ribble valley and throughout the whole of the United Kingdom that, where possible, the food will be sourced from United Kingdom farmers?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman will have seen what we managed to achieve with beef. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will be making a further announcement on meat in his winding-up speech, which I think the hon. Gentleman will find of interest.

The DLO is working on a number of initiatives to revise the principles of supply chain management to generate better ways of working. The aim is a step change in stockholding and repair and maintenance practices which will reduce the volume, value and complexity of the inventory, in turn reducing storage requirements. Greater commercial involvement in support and the increased use of public-private partnerships will improve the delivery and reduce the cost of both logistics and engineering support.

We are also transforming the way we buy the mass of low-value but high-volume items consumed by the armed forces. One example is the Government procurement card which we launched earlier in the year and is now in use at 147 sites. It is effectively a charge card that enables goods and services to be ordered and paid for whenever required, without the need for large amounts of form filling. I have spoken to those on the shop floor who are using it and they find it enormously helpful. It creates greater job satisfaction, because they can get on with the work rather than waiting for parts to come in. They say that it speeds up work, cuts down bureaucracy and reduces turnaround times. That is good for the armed forces on the front line and also for our people in the support chain.

These initiatives are designed to meet the chief of defence logistics' target of 20 per cent. savings on output costs over the next five years, releasing resources for the front line.

From the outset of the strategic defence review, we have acknowledged the need to do more for the men and women who serve in our armed forces and their colleagues. Since taking up office, we have done a great deal to improve the lives of service personnel and their families.

On operational welfare, our levels of operational commitment have been steadily falling in recent months. Some 22 per cent. of the Army is currently committed to operations, compared with 44 per cent. at the height of the Kosovo campaign. We are committed to bringing people home as soon as possible. For example, force levels for operations in Kosovo have reduced from 13,000 last summer to around 3,000 now. It is right that our armed forces should be heavily involved at the height of such operations, given their capabilities and rapid response. It is also right that once the conditions have been created for others to take over some of those tasks, they should do so. The corresponding increase in time between operational deployments that this brings about is welcome. However, we must also recognise the pressures on families during operational deployment.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): One area in which our commitment is increasing is Sierra Leone. Back in June, 250 troops were sent there to help with training. The commitment is now more than 1,000 troops and several royal naval vessels. To many people in the House and outside, rampant mission creep seems to be going on in Sierra Leone. While the situation is awful, and we want to support the United Nations, it seems to me and to many others that no discernible British interest could justify United Kingdom military action in Sierra Leone. If the Foreign and Commonwealth Office allows us to be drawn into that, there will be substantial opposition.

Mr. Spellar: The total number involved in the training and the headquarters support is about 400. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the amphibious group that will be going to Sierra Leone to demonstrate the practicality and effectiveness of the rapid response. That will be for a brief period during November. I do not therefore think that the hon. Gentleman should read that as the kind of dramatic increase that he described.

When our troops are involved in operations, that puts pressure on families. That is why, as I have said before, we have increased the telephone allowance, from three to 20 minutes a week so that deployed personnel can better keep in touch with those at home. We have also provided modern facilities for those wishing to keep in touch via the internet including the "electronic bluey" We have provided internet terminals at military bases and families centres around the country, in our overseas garrisons and on many ships, so that as many people as possible can have access to it.

We have introduced Project WELCOME, a new communications system that gives service personnel deployed on operations access to a welfare telephone while away from home. On my visits to various bases, I have seen that this is working and starting to have an impact on the service. These arrangements have already worked well during recent operations in East Timor, Mozambique and Sierra Leone.

We have also introduced guaranteed periods of post-operational tour leave so that personnel can be assured that they will be able to spend time with their families when they return from operations. That is because we value our forces—service men and women alike—who do a great job. I am sure that many will greatly resent the comments of the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) yesterday. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not here today. They will resent the hon. Gentleman's slurs about the quality of women in our armed forces. I think that he showed himself in his true colours when he praised the forces for being "old-fashioned". No, they are not old-fashioned; they are traditional. The armed forces support traditional values and are probably one of the best examples in our country of traditional values in a modern setting. Service men and women support traditional values but are very up to date in their thinking, adaptability and flexibility.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Can my hon. Friend confirm that steps are being taken to improve the accommodation facilities in Kuwait for our forces?

[Mr. Mike Gapes]

That was drawn to the attention of the Ministry of Defence by the Select Committee on Defence some months ago. The Ministry of Defence replied that improvements were due to start in November. Can my hon. Friend confirm that those improvements will be made and that our forces in Kuwait will get adequate accommodation in the near future?

Mr. Spellar: Those matters were drawn to our attention by the Select Committee on Defence, and to my attention by members of the armed forces about three weeks ago, when I went to Kuwait. I have also had discussions with the Kuwaiti Government, and I understand that the contracts should be signed shortly, which we and they will welcome.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The Minister may not be aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) is not here today because he had a long-standing constituency engagement, which was arranged long before this debate was scheduled; that is why he spoke yesterday.

My recollection is that my hon. Friend's remarks were to the effect that there were certain key military tasks that women, because of their lighter physique and lesser physical strength, could not undertake successfully. That was recognised by the Equal Opportunities Commission when it gave evidence to the Defence Committee a few days ago.

Mr. Spellar: Practical reasons are precisely why the Army is undertaking a full study of that issue, on which it will report next year. It will evaluate the matter properly, unlike the hon. Member for Blaby, from whom we heard the standard blimpish prejudice, which does our debate no good. The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) rightly said that there should be a proper evaluation and assessment of military effectiveness. That is why a proper study is being undertaken. We do not need knee-jerk reactions. They may go down well in saloon bars but they are not appropriate in the House.

We should consider both the forces who are deployed and their families who remain at home. That is why we set up the service families taskforce and encourage families federations for the various services. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) discussed the Navy yesterday. It is true that for a while the Navy did not have a families federation, but we were delighted to support the creation of that body, which provides a channel of communication.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Several of my constituents are the families of the men who serve on HMS Tireless, which is in Gibraltar. There is a feeling that that vessel may be there until next spring. However, little information is reaching the families, who need to know exactly what is going on so that they can make plans for the future. I hope that the information will be disseminated.

Mr. Spellar: It has been said several times from this Dispatch Box that we must assess the final requirement for repairs, and the time scale that that will entail. We are awaiting a report from our engineering experts in order to undertake those repairs, and obviously we shall disseminate the information to the forces and their families. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter.

We have sought to recognise the impact of operations and to introduce various innovations aimed at mitigating some of the differences between service and civilian life. We have taken a leading role in cross-departmental liaison in support of our forces and their families, and the taskforce began its work in the autumn of 1998.

During the past couple of years we have achieved some impressive results, including the code of practice on schools admissions, which now makes specific reference to service children. Service children's education is now represented on new local authority admissions forums in most areas where there are large numbers of service children, and local education authorities are directed to be sensitive to the position of service children returning from abroad. I recognise that there are still some difficulties, but the position is considerably better than it was.

The children of members of the armed forces are now exempt from the three-year residency requirement that is normally needed to qualify for student loans. That means that service children will no longer be disadvantaged by the fact that their parents are serving abroad, especially in Germany or Cyprus.

As a result of the problems that were brought to light by the service families taskforce, the national health service established 24 incentive schemes for dentists to take on more NHS patients in areas where there are large numbers of service personnel. We established that service spouses were, through no fault of their own, not meeting the criteria that would allow them to claim the jobseeker's allowance as they moved around the country. Working with the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Social Security, we produced guidance to overcome the problem.

We are also considering how to help service children with special educational needs, and how to tackle the refusal of credit to service personnel. We believe that it is wrong for the men and women who serve their country with such courage and dedication to be denied services that many of the rest of us take for granted, simply because we require those people, as part of their duty, to move around the country more than the average person would, or to serve overseas.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Although I am no great lover of Labour Defence Ministers, I take this opportunity to congratulate the Minister on the work of the taskforce, which really has made a material difference to the families of members of the services.

Mr. Spellar: I am stuck for a reply; this is totally unprecedented. I merely thank the hon. Gentleman for his generosity.

On training and education, we want to enhance the ability of our personnel in their current work and to improve their ability to seek employment when they leave our service. We are rethinking the ways in which we train and educate our forces. Our learning forces initiative is our contribution to the Government's wider learning age proposals. It will greatly enhance our success with distance learning. Personnel are tapping into the DFEE national network, which involves the learn direct telephone service and online learning advice centres.

The Royal Navy has successfully trialled IT-based learning facilities at sea in the aircraft carriers HMS Invincible and HMS Illustrious. The Army has 115 new internet sites in 33 interactive learning centres.

The motivation that lies behind such initiatives is simple. We want to ensure that the men and women in our armed forces are properly trained and have more opportunities to acquire recognised academic and vocational qualifications. We want to get the best out of them and we want them, when they return to civilian work, to have transferable skills and qualifications. The major new learning credits scheme will expand opportunities for service personnel to pursue academic and vocational qualifications.

Better training is crucial to modernising defence. That is why we are engaged in a fundamental and wide-ranging defence training review to provide our armed forces and civilians with a training system that best meets defence needs in the 21st century.

Training is a multi-billion-pound-a-year business. We need to ensure that it is cost-effective, and that training is shared where it is common between the services and between the services and civilians. To achieve that, we are considering a major programme of rationalisation for defence training and the associated estate, to reduce costs and improve output in support of our joint operational needs. That will contribute to the defence estates strategy, which is aimed at reducing the defence estate to the minimum required to support the effective delivery of defence outputs. The training review team is due to report next spring, when we shall present its findings to the House.

In September, we launched our youth initiative, which involves going more broadly into the community. That initiative is now known as the skill force. It involves teams of serving and recently retired services instructors going into six secondary schools in Newcastle and Norfolk to train a maximum of 25 children in each school in new skills. Those young people are not achieving all that they could, and they may even be in danger of dropping out completely. We want to use the expertise of our service trainers to help to get them motivated and qualified, and to develop skills for life.

The main focus will be key skills training. There will be a chance to develop employability skills and to go for the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and a St. John Ambulance first aid certificate. There is also an opportunity for young people to work towards an ASDAN—the award scheme development and accreditation network—award, which is a vocational qualification that covers several skills-related challenges, including problem solving, working with others and improving one's own learning and performance. We have worked closely with the Home Office and the DFEE to forge partnerships between Departments, the armed forces and the community. That will make a real difference to some people's lives, and I very much look forward to seeing it in action during my visit to Norfolk on 10 November.

Understandably, in this debate we have, as always, mentioned the contribution of our reserve forces and of the wider role of our forces in the community, including the cadet forces. The Reserve Forces Act 1996 took effect more than three and a half years ago. It underpins our policy of making the reserve forces more integrated, relevant and usable. The strategic defence review enabled us to define more clearly what is required of the reserve forces. Their main task has switched from the reinforcement of UK forces engaged in major conflict to supporting regular forces deployed on a much wider range of operations. The reserves are integral to our ability to expand our forces in times of crisis. The more flexible use of reservists also gives us the opportunity to harness skills not readily found within the regular armed forces. It makes sense to use reservists in roles where their particular skills are most useful. For example, 10 per cent. of UK forces currently deployed in the Balkans are reservists, which shows that we are putting that into effect.

More and more people are taking up the opportunity of full-time reserve service. Well over 1,000 individuals are now serving on those terms. The second Hercules into Sierra Leone, when our forces deployed there so successfully in May, had an FTRS pilot. That is a further step towards maximising the flexibility and employability of our reserve forces, and we often learn from the experience of other countries about taking a more flexible approach on such matters.

Mr. Key: I do not seek to be provocative, I merely seek information. Can the Minister confirm that among the 1,000 or so troops being trained to drive tankers, there are no Territorial Army volunteers, only regulars?

Mr. Spellar: Yes. They are all regular forces. I thought that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary had clarified that, but I am pleased to confirm it now.

On the other side of the coin, we recognise that employers of reservists are wholly justified in asking what they get in return. The reserve forces have always provided outstanding management and leadership training, but we want to balance the additional demands on employers with the provision of more meaningful qualifications, as a result of which employers have a loyal and better trained work force. We are making considerable progress on that, enabling our reserve officers and NCOs to gain national certificates and diplomas in management—qualifications which will be recognised in the outside world as well. Employers benefit from that, which balances the demands that supporting employees serving in the reserves places on the workplace.

Mr. Brazier: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time, especially as I do not intend to be as kind on this occasion. Will he confirm that despite the initiatives that he has mentioned, reserve officer recruiting has collapsed, and that of the last three courses at Sandhurst, none filled half its places and the worst filled only about a quarter of its places? Will he also confirm that among the reserves being used, the category most heavily used at the moment continues to be the infantry?

Mr. Spellar: We recognise the considerable pressures in terms of the number of hours, particularly on those who work in management, which is having an effect on the reserve forces. We need to consider both our work and the need for discussions with employers. There is a considerable role for the infantry, a number of whom I met in Kosovo and Bosnia. In addition, there are heavy demands on our specialist reserve forces, particularly, as I have mentioned a number of times in the House,

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on signals. We must consider the difficulties arising from the number of signallers in the regular forces, as a result of their attractiveness because of the excellent training that we provide, and the explosion in the communications industry, which has led to the industry poaching them from us. We recognise those pressures. We do not say that there are no difficulties, but we are providing more equipment for many of those reserve forces, making them more usable in the sort of operations that the hon. Gentleman described.

The cadet organisations continue to go from strength to strength, providing more than 128,000 young people with opportunities to participate in military, sporting, adventurous and community-based activities, developing their social and personal skills, giving them the opportunity to mix regularly with service personnel and gain an insight into the realities of service life.

In several areas of the country, adult instructors from the Army cadet force have also been involved in a programme under which they provide supervised activities for young people from their local communities who are deemed to be at risk of offending or have committed minor crimes. Exposure to the Army cadet force assists such young people with their personal development. We owe a great deal to the adult instructors involved with the cadet organisations—some 23,000 in all. We have underlined our commitment to their work by investing £3 million of new money in the cadets. That is good value for the armed forces and for the community.

Mr. Evans: We all want to see more young people being attracted into the armed forces, but will the Minister comment on the article in today's *Daily Mail* under the banner headlines "Navy's symbol of shame" and "Our crumbling defences . . . the catalogue of calamity". Does the Minister think that when young people read such stories they will be attracted to the British armed forces?

Mr. Spellar: That is an interesting comment. The hon. Gentleman is saying that such smear campaigns, by newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*, may have an impact on young people and their view of the armed forces. I agree with the hon. Gentleman in his criticism of the outrageous behaviour of the *Daily Mail*.

Let us deal with the question of the German submarine. Every week, off Plymouth, we conduct naval exercises that are so good that navies from all over Europe and other parts of the world want to participate. I have participated in one myself, as have other hon. Members, including Front-Bench Opposition Members, under the armed forces parliamentary scheme. Those exercises are excellent. As the hon. Gentleman knows, as a result of a decision taken by the previous Conservative Government, we no longer have conventional diesel submarines. I make no complaint about this, but our submarines are configured for a different and much larger role; they are nuclear submarines. Therefore, as part of those exercises, other navies provide submarines, and have been doing so for a considerable time. A figure is worked out for the daily use of the submarine as part of those exercises, and we charge a largely theoretical figure for participation in the exercises and the training that we provide. That has been going on for a considerable time and it works effectively. To suggest that U-boats are guarding Britain, as was portrayed in articles such as the one that the hon. Gentleman mentioned is deplorable. But he is right to say that if people believe that rubbish, they might be deterred. Those who write it should be ashamed of themselves.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I associate the Opposition with the Minister's comments about the cadet force. It is hugely important and we definitely want to see it enhanced and rebuilt, which seems to be a view shared by the Government. The hon. Gentleman referred to the number of reservists serving in Kosovo and Bosnia, but is it not the case that, of those available in the Territorial Army, about one third are available for such postings? If one reduces the global ceiling of the number available, one also reduces the ceiling of those available for such postings. Does not that suggest that the cut of 18,000 was a mistake, and that in all honesty, it is time to review it?

Mr. Spellar: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not, in one preliminary sentence, join me in condemning the sort of campaign to which the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) referred. I should have thought that he would deplore such attacks on our armed forces—but he has never said what he would do about the submarines; he simply makes gratuitous comments. There is a need for a balance, but there has been a significant shift in what we require of reserve forces from the traditional role of the reinforcement of UK forces engaged in major conflict on the north German plain and the guarding of strategic facilities in the UK—the cold war configuration. Therefore there has been a reshaping of our reserves towards the specialised arms.

Mr. Brazier: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Spellar: No, we have been round that course a number of times.

I conclude by reminding the House of the huge range of activities that our forces undertake day in and day out. At this moment our armed forces are continuing their valuable work throughout the globe.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State spoke about our forces' efforts on operational deployments in the varied and often challenging environments of Sierra Leone, the Balkans and the Gulf. The armed forces maintain a significant presence in Cyprus, Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands and Brunei. United Kingdom forces are also important contributors to a variety of United Nations operations, helping to build a safer and more secure environment in Georgia, East Timor, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, on the green line in Cyprus and on the border between Iraq and Kuwait.

We currently have two joint task groups in the Mediterranean, one based around the carrier Invincible and the other including the amphibious ships Fearless and Ocean. In all, we have 21 ships, 34 aircraft and almost 5,000 personnel from all three services with those task groups.

Seventeen ships are at sea in home waters, including four involved in fisheries protection. Two are in the Gulf, five are in the Atlantic and two are in the Caribbean. As ever, we have a Trident submarine on deterrent patrol. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explained to hon. Members yesterday, those vessels have not been affected by the technical difficulties which are currently

under investigation with our strategic submarine nuclear fleet. The Royal Marines are in Northern Ireland, in Kosovo and in the eastern Mediterranean as part of the amphibious group. All our dependent territories have been visited by a Royal Navy ship at least once this year. During 2000 our ships will visit, and in most cases train with, more than 100 different countries from Trinidad to Tokyo and from the Virgin Islands to Vladivostock.

We have more than 2,000 soldiers in Bosnia helping to provide the security conditions for the Bosnian people to rebuild their country, and we have 3,000 more in Kosovo. The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment is in Sierra Leone providing training to the Sierra Leone army. A major armoured training exercise, Iron Eagle, is under way in Canada. A team of Army engineers is in Zambia helping to teach the Zambian army how to repair and maintain vehicles.

The Royal Air Force is deployed on operations in the Gulf and in the Balkans. It provides air defence and air transport support in the Falklands and supports the Army in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I am conscious that the Minister is trying to set out the range of activities in which our armed forces are engaged. However, he will recall from last night that a number of points were raised. I raised some specific points about the cannon for the Eurofighter Typhoon, the type of training and the priority for spares. I also raised the issue of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, concern about which is shared by Labour councillors, including the Minister's close friend in Aldershot. Does the Minister intend to deal with those issues, or will the Under-Secretary deal with them?

Mr. Spellar: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he put that. I am pleased to side-foot that to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary. It is called the division of labour—but the Opposition should know an awful lot about internal division. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green certainly knows about divisions, although I noticed that he kept out of the cannabis debate. I do not know whether he supports the shadow Home Secretary on that issue or whether he is just keeping out of it.

In addition, our aircraft are deployed widely, training with our allies to maintain operational effectiveness. This week, two Nimrod aircraft are exercising with the US Navy on the east coast of the USA, a flight of Harrier aircraft is flying across the Atlantic with a VC10 tanker and Nimrod support to train in Canada, and a joint exercise will start, bringing allied aircraft, ships and submarines together.

I have given just a snapshot of the huge range and scale of important activities which our forces get up to every day, helping to build a safer world and helping communities both at home and overseas. The Government are committed to ensuring that our armed forces become even more capable of carrying out those and other tasks, both at home and abroad. We have under way the best equipment programme in decades. We are committed to making things better for our people, providing better training and better support on operations, working with other Government Departments to bring better support at home, and looking at terms and conditions, and housing. Those are not just words and fine sentiments. Much of what I have described is already happening. We have already underwritten our plans with a significant real-terms increase in the defence budget under the spending review 2000. This is a Government who are serious about defence, serious about the future of defence, and proud to be working with our armed forces to achieve that.

2.54 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Much of what the Minister has said is extremely sensible and positive. We welcome many of the things about which he has talked, such as the improvement in the logistics organisation and the recent arrangement with Rolls-Royce for repair of aircraft. All that seems to make complete sense, and we are glad that he is doing it. We congratulate him on the progress that he is making in improving some of the welfare issues that are so important for our armed services. The compliment that the Minister received from my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) was thoroughly deserved.

In the spirit of good-natured frankness across the Floor of the House, it might have been appreciated if the Minister had recalled—perhaps he did not mention it because he did not recall it—that three years ago my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) drew the attention of the Government, who were apparently ignorant of the problem, to the difficulty that our armed forces families experience, owing to the extent to which they move about, in getting credit and qualifying for the working families tax credit. I am glad to hear today that the Government have taken action on that, but the initial impetus came from the Opposition Front Bench. It was long before I sat on the Opposition Front Bench, but some credit might have been given to my hon. Friend.

Most of what the Minister said was measured, sensible and businesslike. Why he decided to start off so hysterically, I have no idea. Perhaps some spin doctor gave him his riding instructions. No doubt he would not give way to me because he was embarrassed about the rubbish that he was reading out. The whole Conservative party is committed to the Eurofighter programme. We launched the programme, signed the contract for it and defended it when there were difficulties with our allies—for example, when the Germans got cold feet about it.

Mr. Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Quentin Davies: I will of course give way to the Minister if he will le me finish my sentence.

We are also committed to the A400M programme—my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) made that clear when the programme was announced—but we are worried about whether the Government are capable of running that programme in a properly disciplined fashion and getting those aircraft into service when they are required.

The trouble is that the Government do not care about Parliament. They do not listen to what is said in Parliament. They would be a much more effective Government if they did. It is one of the great purposes of a debate such as this to bring forward the experience and knowledge of people across the House. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), who is again present in the Chamber, said

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on the record that a French two-star air force general had said to him that he did not expect the A400M to come into service for 15 years. I trust that I am accurately quoting my right hon. Friend—I see from his nodding that I am. As we all know, my right hon. Friend is an extremely senior Member of the House and extremely experienced, especially in foreign affairs and defence matters. So a comment such as that must be taken seriously. We should be failing in our task as an Opposition if we did not raise such desperately serious matters and expect the Government to deal with them seriously. Childish scatter-gun insults based on ignorance of Opposition policy is no way to deal with vital defence matters.

If the Minister still wants me to give way to him, I will do so.

Mr. Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman condemn the comments of Lord Tebbit in attacking Eurofighter?

Mr. Davies: I have not seen, and am not particularly interested in, Lord Tebbit's comments about the Eurofighter. I know that Lord Tebbit used to fly aircraft, but I believe that they were civilian aircraft. In my job, I have an awful lot of reading matter to get through written by people who are considered experts, and I am afraid that I have not come yet across anything written on the subject by Lord Tebbit.

This is a debate about our armed forces, and I want my principal remarks to be focused on the men and women who serve in them. It is also a defence debate and, as such, a very important occasion in the parliamentary timetable. We have only three major defence debates in the year.

I wish to raise a number of current issues on which we must get answers from the Government. I have seven key questions and I expect seven thoroughly serious answers before the end of the debate tonight.

It is about eight months since my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked me to take on my role as Opposition spokesman on Defence. It has been an enormous privilege to do so, but the greatest privilege of all has been the opportunity to spend time with the men and women who serve in our armed forces. In that regard, I am extremely grateful to the Government because they have enabled me to visit many military units in this country and, on two occasions, abroad—in the Gulf and in the Falklands.

Unlike some of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I do not have a professional background in the forces. Anyone who comes afresh to the world of the forces would share my reaction, which is one of enormous admiration and, sometimes, positive amazement at the consistent standard of motivation, and the thoroughness, professionalism, and perfectionism—a word I do not use lightly—with which members of the armed services approach their tasks, whether it be the handling or repairing of their equipment, their staff work or the planning and carrying out of their exercises. The atmosphere of discipline, interdependence, teamwork and selflessness that pervades the armed forces, and their can-do approach to life are wonderfully refreshing.

Anyone who meets members of the armed forces—as I have so fortunately been able to do during the past few months—will have no doubt that the country is enormously lucky in their calibre. The only problem is that there are too few of them. Their numbers are down—currently, 8,000 below the minimum set out in the strategic defence review. That is thoroughly unsatisfactory.

Those numbers are subject to two variables: recruitment and retention. I have no criticism to make of the Government on recruitment; on the whole, they are undertaking sensible measures—similar to those that we might adopt if we were in their place—and there should be some small improvement as a result. We hope for further improvement.

The retention aspect, however, is especially alarming—as I think the Government realise. The retention problem contains the potential for a serious indictment of Government policy. Men and women are not serving in the armed forces for as long as they themselves expected to serve, and thus for as long as was anticipated when they were recruited. Furthermore, they do not spend as long in the forces as their predecessors. That is worrying and we must take the problem seriously.

There are several reasons for falling retention, all of which relate to morale. One reason is political correctness. The points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) yesterday were absolutely correct. He referred to the absurdities of the armed forces discipline legislation. Apparently, if one appeals against a commanding officer's decision in a disciplinary case, the ultimate punishment that one can receive cannot be more severe—and might even be more lenient—than the one originally imposed by the commanding officer. It will thus be rational for everyone to appeal against their commanding officer. It is hard to imagine a provision which, with one blow, will more effectively undermine discipline in the armed forces. We owe that wholly gratuitous attack on morale and discipline to the new Labour Government.

I shall not avoid another extremely important issue—women. No civilised or sensible person would suggest for a moment that we should discriminate against people on the grounds of sex. However, I have yet to meet any service woman who suggests that women should benefit from positive discrimination—so-called affirmative action. It would be irresponsible to the point of insanity to suggest that the thresholds for performance or other military attributes should be lowered on the grounds of sex when recruiting or promoting service personnel when people's lives depend on how they perform in conditions of great stress and difficulty.

The matter is not one of principle but of pragmatism. I pay great tribute to the role of women in all three services—in the front line in the RAF and, even more so, in the Navy. The extent to which women should be employed in the Army is a matter for the Army to decide. That is most important. The idea that politicians are interfering with such professional decisions is devastating for military morale.

Of course, it is up to political leaders to deploy the armed services: to ask them—at risk of their lives and, invariably, under considerable discomfort—to deploy to promote the country's interests and to defend our freedom. However, it is not the business of Ministers to interfere in the actual management of the armed services and to tell them by which criteria they should carry out recruitment and promotion. That distinction is essential.

I hope that Ministers will keep out of that matter altogether—as I assure the House the next Conservative Government will.

Several points on welfare were made clearly in yesterday's debate. I hope that the Government will listen to what is said in Parliament—especially from their Back Benchers. The hon. Members for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) and for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) and other hon. Members mentioned housing problems both for single people and for married couples. Those matters must be taken seriously.

The Minister for the Armed Forces tells us that he is taking all these points on board and that he is trying to do his best. We shall hold him to that. Will he give us regular updates and reports on the progress in improving housing?

Mr. Gapes: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the problems of housing that have bedevilled the armed forces date back to the 18 years when his party was in Government?

Mr. Davies: That is a petty party political point. Those housing problems go back to the 18th century. During the past 200 years, we have been making steady progress in housing Navy and Army personnel—as we have for the RAF during the past 50 to 80 years.

As civilisation advances, we hope that the armed forces—and not just the rest of society—reap the benefits too, and that people do not have to sleep on iron bedsteads 40 to a barrack room in a Nissan hut. That was probably the situation when the hon. Gentleman was a national service man in the 1950s—or during whatever the period on which he bases his example.

Contact with families is also crucial. It is one thing to be sent abroad—to a remote location, doing an inevitably dangerous job in difficult conditions. That is what the armed forces are trained for. However, contact with one's family is essential. These days, that means being able to telephone and to use the internet.

I welcome the Minister's statement about the greater availability of internet access for members of the forces posted overseas. I experienced that when I visited the Falklands recently. Real progress is being made. A new computer centre is being installed. That is a positive move and I pay tribute to the Government for that.

Progress has been made on telephones. Earlier this year, the Minister announced that members of the armed forces serving in war zones would be given 20 minutes of free telephone time every week to speak to their families. One could always ask for more, but that is an important step forward for which I thank the Government.

When I returned from Kuwait, I held a private conversation with the Minister, but—as will become clear—it is reasonable and proper for me to mention it now. I told him that, in practice, people were experiencing problems in getting through on the telephone. He sorted out the problem and—generously—paid tribute to me in the House for having brought it to his attention. Obviously, his mood then was different from his mood earlier this afternoon.

We are making steady progress and that is splendid. I take this opportunity to make a further suggestion. When I visited the Falklands, I found that although people had telephone access, it was extremely expensive. The overseas allowance for the Falkland Islands happens to be 35p a day, which seems pretty derisory. It costs 80p or 90p a minute to telephone the United Kingdom from the Falkland Islands, depending on the hour of the day, so one minute costs twice the whole of one day's overseas allowance.

Obviously, that situation is very unsatisfactory. Perhaps the overseas allowance should be increased to take account of the cost of telephone calls, but I want to suggest to the Minister a much more sensible arrangement. Of course, in a war zone, our armed forces may telephone home for 20 minutes for free, but my suggestion extends beyond that. We should establish a general principle that when we deploy our armed forces abroad, they may telephone home for the rate that the same call would cost them within the UK. That is very reasonable. It is not their fault that they are sent abroad; it is not their fault that "abroad" may mean 500 or 8,000 miles away, as with the Falkland Islands; and it is not their fault that a particular telephone company happens to have a monopoly of telecommunications in the country concerned. I hope that we shall make further progress on that.

Contact with families is very important indeed. Traditionally, it has been very important. The hon. Member for Ilford, South will remember from his time in the Army that troops were very concerned about when their mail deliveries arrived. Of course, in those days, although there may have been telephones, they did not really work across frontiers. Now we are moving into the telecommunications age, and I hope that we can improve matters.

Mr. Gapes: Let me put the record straight. I was born in September 1952, so presumably I would have been called up at the age of six.

Mr. Davies: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if his appearance deceived me somewhat. I am getting fairly bald myself, so I had better be careful.

Clearly, one of the big issues about morale, and the retention that impacts greatly on it, is the number of deployments and the rapid turnround time between them. The Minister has said that the situation is much better than it was at the height of the Kosovo campaign, and we are grateful for that. We are certainly grateful for the minimum leave time after overseas deployments, but obviously this is a self-aggravating problem. To improve morale, we must get our numbers up to scratch. The only way to get our numbers up to scratch effectively in short order would be to work on the retention, rather than the recruitment, side of the equation, because it would take much longer to get our numbers up simply by enhanced recruitment. If we can persuade people to stay on a little longer, we shall get there. Everything should be focused on trying to do so.

At present, what is particularly upsetting people is not the announcement of unexpected new deployments, because everyone who joins the armed services knows that they are at the mercy of international events. They are serving the Queen, and they know that they may have to go anywhere in the light of what happens in the world, which, in the nature of things, is not predictable. But what is particularly annoying and frustrating, and a legitimate source of grievance, is knowing that the reason why they

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have not had the leave, or the time at home, or the home posting, that they expected has nothing to do with the international situation, or with serving the Queen—it is simply that the Government have not got the numbers up to strength. They are being deployed because the guy who should have been deployed for the operation is not there because the numbers are lacking. Therefore it is a self-aggravating problem, and in my view the Government must do something about it, as a matter of real urgency.

Two other things impact on morale, although their major deleterious impact is actually on the operational side—on our ability to do the job, defend the country and carry out our mission. The first of those is the training business.

In the past 12 months, the present Government have gone in for cancelling training exercises to save piffling amounts of money. The amounts are probably less than they are spending on military lawyers and military policemen under their completely unnecessary Armed Forces Discipline Act 2000, which will cost £15 million in the first year. For such amounts of money they have been cancelling major naval exercises. They cancelled the Flotex exercise. They cancelled the Marines' winter exercise in Norway. Anyone who knows anything about the Marines knows that that is one of the two major events of the year—an essential part of their training. The Government must stop cancelling these exercises for such reasons.

Of course there are operational reasons, or other reasons beyond the Government's control, why exercises may have to be cancelled and rescheduled, but they should not be cancelled for that kind of penny-pinching reason, least of all when the Government are wasting money as they are. We want an absolute commitment that when exercises are cancelled they will be reinstated. They should merely be deferred, and the Government should have an obligation to reinstate them.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): On the issue of the Royal Marines' Arctic exercise, when I was with 42 Commando in Virginia last year, people told me that they were quite pleased not to be doing the Arctic training that winter because it was a regular thing, which they had done time and again, and they felt that they knew it. They found other things that they were involved in to be much more beneficial to them. I accept that some exercises may have been cancelled on financial grounds, but I do not think that the Marines going to the Arctic was one of them.

Mr. Davies: It is wonderful with what gallantry the Liberal Democrats rush to the Government's defence, even though Ministers sit paralysed on their Bench, not knowing how to respond. That is a good try, but it will not work, because that exercise was not cancelled for functional reasons. If it was cancelled for functional reasons, let the Government now say in terms what the functional reasons were which meant that, in terms of greater priorities, that exercise should not have taken place at that time. I fear that it was cancelled for the reasons that I mentioned. It makes the whole matter a great deal more squalid when concealment is added to the initial failure and there is an attempt to bamboozle the public. It is a very important issue indeed.

The second matter that has an important impact on morale but is primarily of importance for operational, functional reasons is equipment. The Government must not neglect it. If equipment is not adequate—if we ask our men and women to fight without the equipment which they should have, and which allies fighting alongside them, such as the Americans, have—that is deeply demoralising. It is a thoroughly unsatisfactory state of affairs if our armed forces cannot communicate, if they are not properly interoperable, or if they are at risk from events from which allied forces taking part in the same operation may not be at risk.

On Thursday, I mentioned a list of instances in which, at present, our equipment is inadequate and the Government have not responded with anything like the necessary urgency, or at all. Where are the stern sonars for type 23 frigates? When will they be fitted? Five type 23 frigates, supposedly with an anti-submarine role, do not have those stern sonars. The Government have spent three years on the GR1-GR4 conversion programme. We have yet to hear what stage it has reached and when it will be completed. Those are very important matters.

The SA80 is absolutely crucial. The fear that one's rifle may jam in an emergency can have a terrible effect on morale. That must be sorted out definitively, one way or another.

That brings me to the subject of communications. What an extraordinary state of affairs it is in which the British Army is sent into combat in the field with portable telephones—the sort of thing that can be bought in any store on the Tottenham Court road—or, even worse, with a radio system, the Clansman, that does not work properly or is not as secure as it should be.

There is no doubt at all that this has been a long, complicated saga and that the matter was not resolved—as I wish it had been—in the 18 years of Conservative Government. Equally, there is no doubt at all that this Government bear 100 per cent. responsibility for what has happened over the last three and a half years. Almost throughout that time they have put themselves in the hands of the Archer consortium, and they have now confessed that that was a mistake.

I understand the reluctance of any Government to stop throwing good money after bad. The Government have taken more than three years to take that decision. They have pulled the contract away from Archer and are re-letting it, and we wish them good luck and godspeed in getting it right this time. Nevertheless, we have lost £200 million and three years. The Government would come out of this story with a great deal more dignity and credibility if they were prepared explicitly to accept their share of responsibility for that disaster.

Mr. Donald Anderson: The hon. Gentleman is giving a long list of reasons, mostly valid, for problems in recruitment. Is he not missing the main point—that we are now benefiting from the lowest unemployment for over 20 years?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is wrong in this respect: the military profession is a vocation. In some ways, it is rather like the House of Commons, for example. I do not think that there is any falling away of desire to come and serve in this place simply because people could make more money elsewhere. The military

profession has always been a vocation and attracts a particular type of person. Frankly, it would not be suitable for the great mass of humanity. Furthermore, the profession has considerable advantages. I have yet to come across anyone who has spent a part of his career in the military—where he may be superbly trained to do a technical job or go on to do a management job—who has not added not only to the richness of his life but to his qualifications for a subsequent job in the civilian sector.

I said that I wanted to take advantage of this debate to extract information from the Government. "Extract" is the verb that I must use, because we have to go through a painful and long drawn-out process to obtain information these days. The Government do not like telling Parliament anything. When they want to give information out, they like to do so in a highly doctored, selective way through the press and in a way that is carefully spun by their spin doctors. What they do not like to do is give straight answers to Parliament.

May we have straight answers this afternoon? We shall all be listening to find out whether the Government are capable of doing that. I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence is more than capable of providing them if he wishes to do so and if he is allowed to do so by his superiors on the Government Front Bench and in the Treasury, which seems to run military policy under this Government. If the Government give us straight answers, we will be able to have a serious discussion and move forward. If not, we shall continue to return to the issues until we receive straight answers. Let me give the Government that warning at the outset.

First, on submarines, at least some information was given to us yesterday—although we did not have a formal statement because we rarely hear them these days—and I am grateful for that. However, it was not enough, as my intervention yesterday made absolutely clear. We know that five of our 12 hunter-killer submarines have been cleared of having the same problem that HMS Tireless has in Gibraltar. That is very good news, and I understand that three of the strategic submarine nuclear—SSN—vessels that have been cleared are Swiftsure class and that the other two are Trafalgar class. However, if the Government do not yet know, when do they expect to know the status of the other submarines? We know about five and Tireless, so that makes six. If we subtract six from 12, we get six, and I think that the Government will agree with the arithmetic. What is the status of the other submarines, and when can we expect to know that?

We also need to know what is happening about Tireless. How long will she remain in Gibraltar? Will she be repaired in Gibraltar, or will she be towed back to this country? How long will it take to repair her? If other SSNs are found to need work, are the berths and specialists available? What time scale can we expect before the SSN fleet—God knows it is the smallest that it has been in the past 50 years—is back in service. At the best of times, we do not normally have more than seven or eight of the submarines available for operations, so we badly need to know what the position is.

Secondly, can we have a statement about the Tucanos? I am surprised that the Government have not provided any information about them, because I would have given it if I were a Minister. Tucanos are the prime Royal Air Force trainer and they are all out of service. There must be about 100 of them although the Under-Secretary will give me the exact figure. Every one of them is out of service, and it is amazing that, last week, two whole systems or platforms were completely out of service. I cannot remember an occasion when even one system was out of service. It is amazing what happens under a new Labour Government. I am sure that Ministers want us to believe that that is a coincidence.

Can we please know what is happening to the Tucanos and what the nature of the problem is? When do Ministers expect them to be fixed? We merely want clear answers on that subject. We have no objection to the pilots being sent in the meantime to Australia; that may be a sensible solution.

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will deal with the details, but let me make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that all armed forces would sensibly take aircraft or other vehicles out of service when a common defect in one type is found and while the fault is established and the recovery programme is undertaken. That happens in all forces. The United States Marines recently had three of their major platforms grounded while they were dealing with defects. That happens in the commercial world, too.

All the hon. Gentleman should be considering is the defect, its cause, the recovery programme and the alternatives available, and my hon. Friend will deal with those points. Instead of becoming excitable, the hon. Gentleman should accept that such things happen and that we will deal with them.

Mr. Davies: The Minister at least takes a fairly humble tone for once. I am glad about that, because the Government owe the House answers. The hon. Gentleman has touched on exactly the questions that I asked. What is the defect and what is the time scale within which it will be fixed? If he had been listening to my remarks, he would have realised that I said that it was not necessarily wrong to withdraw either the submarines or the Tucanos from service—not at all; I dare say that was the right thing to do. However, we do not know all the facts that we should know. Perhaps we will have them at the end of the debate, but I certainly did not suggest that those platforms should not have been withdrawn from service. However, since the first announcements about those two disasters were spun out in the media in the way they usually are, I have thought that the House was owed a full and proper explanation. We still have not received one.

Let me deal now with the third platform—the Lynx helicopter. We have just over 200 of them—how many of them are currently out of commission because of the rotor head fatigue problem? I realise that a certain number of Lynx helicopters will always be in refit or being maintained, but how many of them that should be operational are not operational? Can we have an update on the position, because we have heard nothing since my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green asked a parliamentary question in May? The Government do not seem to want to tell the House anything, but they must tell us where we stand on this important piece of equipment that is essential to the Army, the Marines and the Navy.

The fourth key point that I come to is ISTAR, and for the benefit of the *Hansard* writers I should spell out what that means. It is the information, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance capability. We should

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have had a statement on that, but we have not. The Government have entered into a contract to purchase aircraft with an airborne stand-off radar—ASTOR—fitted to them. However, we have not heard how many aircraft are being purchased and when they will come into service. Can we please have a clear statement on this important aspect of the country's military capability?

Fifthly, it is extraordinary that the Government did not take the opportunity in last Thursday's debate or yesterday to mention the most important procurement decision that they are likely to take in the remaining months of their time in office. After that, they can enjoy the benefits of opposition and we can give them advice on how to play it in opposition when we change places with them.

Before the next election—even if the election comes as early as May—the Government will have to take a crucial decision on the joint strike fighter programme. Will we enter the engineering management design—EMD—stage for the JSF? *[Interruption.]* I think that I heard the Under-Secretary say under his breath that he did not know yet, but the Government have a way of running away from difficult decisions. If they do not know yet, what factors that are currently not available to them do they need to be aware of so that they can take an informed decision? I hope that the Under-Secretary will answer my first question.

Secondly, by when do we need to take the decision? The Americans have said that the decision must definitely be taken soon, but have they given us a deadline? If so, when is it? Thirdly, how much will it cost us to join the EMD stage? I am told that it is $2 billion. Is that figure approximately correct? If it is, over what time scale will the money have to be paid over to the US Department of Defence? Fourthly, if we do pay over the $2 billion, what will we receive for it? Will we receive an assurance of full access to the technology and to the know-how that will enable the British partners to build the aircraft or parts of the aircraft here and will we have full access to the updates on technology? Will there be full know-how disclosure?

Fifthly, will there be an opportunity for British subcontractors and American subcontractors to bid on the same basis in exchange for $2 billion, which is no mean sum? Sixthly, if we pay the $2 billion up front, will we benefit from an export levy on third-party sales of the joint strike fighter subsequently? Seventhly, if we are to come up with the $2 billion, is that money already in the budget, or will the Minister have to go to the Treasury to get a supplementary budget? If it is to come out of the Ministry of Defence budget, will that be at the expense of something else? We need a clear answer.

If we do not pay the $2 billion, what are the penalties? Will we have sufficient control of the programme? Given that specifications may change at the later EMD stage, in addition to what is agreed, is that a satisfactory situation?

Finally on this matter, will the decision to enter the EMD phase prejudice in any way our decision whether to go for conventional take-off and landing aircraft or short take-off and vertical landing aircraft? In other words, whether we go for a STOVL or a CTOL-type carrier. There is an important interrelationship between these decisions and we must establish whether the one will prejudice the other. I hope that we shall have some straightforward answers on this important matter. It is the most important procurement decision that the Government might take, and they have steadily and studiously avoided mentioning a breath of it. They have not said a word about it to Parliament. That is not good enough.

I shall make two other important points, and I hope that the Under-Secretary, who is to reply, will listen to them. Again, we want some answers.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Before my hon. Friend finishes his list, will he point out that most of us who spoke yesterday made a number of serious points which received no reply? Will he reiterate the need for us to know what the Government intend with the Parliamentary Assembly if the Western European Union is done away with? Perhaps the Government would also like to say what extra money or manpower is needed for them to go forward, if they intend to, with the European defence initiative. These questions must be answered.

Mr. Davies: I hope that my right hon. Friend's points will be taken on board. I have already reminded the Government of the important matter that my right hon. Friend raised yesterday and of the intelligence that he brought to the House about the French view of the likely coming-into-service date of the A400M. I hope that the Government will respond.

I have not finished with the Government because I shall raise two other important matters on which decisions will be taken shortly, and certainly long before we have another defence debate. We need to know where the Government stand. That is what parliamentary government is all about. One of the two matters is the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. The Government will have to take a decision on it. When will they take it? The worst thing is the uncertainty that their present indecision and vacillation has created. The situation is extremely worrying.

DERA is losing people. Its annual report sets out the decline in manpower in the agency. DERA will also be losing out on collaborative opportunities with the private sector and elsewhere, including the Americans in their public sector, with the Department of Defence and its various institutes. This continuing state of uncertainty has caused damage. When will a decision be taken? That is the first thing that we need to know.

If the Minister does not know, let me help him with the decision that he must take. Whatever decision he takes, he must not opt for the breaking up or fragmentation of the agency and partial privatisation. That would be the worst of all possible worlds. We know that that would be a squalid compromise between the initial proposal that the previous Conservative Administration turned down after due consideration of complete privatisation and the Treasury's desperate desire to get £300 million out of defence at any price in terms of our future defence capability. Also, there are the American objections to full privatisation. Such a decision would not add up.

I shall set out four good reasons why such a decision would not make sense. First, DERA has the dual role of advising the Government on the evaluation of defence bids and research. It is extremely important that the Government have access to independent technical advice on evaluation. The agency's second role is the research and development that it carries out when assessing new military technologies.

Theoretically, the agency could be divided along those lines, but it would be disastrous to do so. DERA has first-class scientists who are at the head of their game internationally. If they were told that they were only to be in the business of advising the Government and evaluating bids, having been taken away from the coal face of research, they would not stay in the agency. That would lead to second and third-rate people undertaking evaluation and advisory roles. We cannot split DERA on that basis.

A second basis on which we might theoretically split the agency is the one on which the Government are proceeding, which is to keep in a retained DERA those parts of the organisation that are working in close collaboration with the United States so as to appease American fears, and to privatise the rest. That will not work either because the two divides will not be the same. There is the division between the people whom we need to retain to advise the Government objectively and those engaged in research, and the other people we need to retain because they are dealing with the Americans and the Americans do not want them to be privatised; and the two distinctions do not coincide.

Thirdly, even if we could make such a distinction on day one, it would not be valid the following day, the following week or the following month. It is important that all aspects of DERA can enter into fruitful collaboration with overseas partners, especially the Americans. That relationship is crucial. It can also enter into joint ventures with the private sector. We cannot freeze for once and all which parts of DERA may be involved either with the Americans or with the evaluation and internal advisory role as opposed to the research role. That does not make sense.

Finally, if the Government think—it would be entirely consistent with the frame of mind and culture of new Labour—that they can somehow finesse the issue by clever spin, by saying that one part of the agency is being privatised and the other is being retained, when in practice both parts will stay together in the same building and have a symbiotic relationship, they underestimate the intelligence of other people. The Americans and the private sector here are not fools; they will see through that immediately. If there is to be a bogus exercise, the Government will end up again with the worst of all possible worlds, with disruption being caused and unnecessary costs being incurred by having two organisations and two sets of overheads. The Americans will still walk away and the private sector will still hesitate to deal with the privatised sector of DERA because there is the issue of giving away for free its own intellectual property. That concern will inevitably exist if it is dealing with what might be a rival commercial enterprise.

There is no basis on which DERA can be split up, except one which will seriously damage the utility and, therefore, the value of DERA as a whole. There will be enormous negative synergies if the organisation is split, and the Government should think again while there is time.

Finally, I come to the great decision that the Government must take in the next three weeks. We are coming up to the commitment conference under the common European foreign security and defence policy, at which the various member states of the European Union will say what they are contributing to the party, or to the catalogue as it is technically called, to achieve the Helsinki headline goals. We are only three weeks away from the conference. Either the Government do not know what they will contribute or they are damn well not going to tell Parliament about it. This is the second day of the defence debate, and we had a defence debate last week, but we still have not heard a word about the UK contribution.

Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green dealt extremely authoritatively, if I may say so, with the important political, geopolitical and philosophical aspects of CEFSDP. He referred to the possible advantages, the risks and the motivation of the Government in proceeding in one direction or another. I am merely dealing with practical decisions that must be taken in the next couple of weeks or so. I am asking on behalf of Parliament what the Government will do. What have they decided? It is inconceivable that a commitment conference is to take place in three weeks' time and the Government do not know what they will say. Are they going to be completely empty pocketed and empty handed? If they know, they should be telling Parliament now.

Also, we need to know what commitment the Government intend to make in terms of prioritising assets. It is clear that this will be an exercise in double-hatting, triple-hatting or even quadruple-hatting. After all, our forces have commitments to NATO. We may have domestic commitments in Northern Ireland, or commitments overseas—for example, the Falklands, possibly Brunei or Zimbabwe, if that blows up, or perhaps Belize, if we still regard ourselves as committed there. Those have nothing to do with either the Washington treaty or the Brussels treaty territorial defence commitments, or with the new Petersberg tasks and therefore with the headline goals.

We thus have, first, the NATO article 5 commitments; secondly, the other overseas and domestic commitments; and thirdly, a commitment—which some of us find rather worrying and gratuitous—to support UN forces. Now the Government are coming up with a fourth commitment, so it seems that we will be quadruple-hatting the same assets and the same men and women in our armed services. That is a meaningless exercise—just playing with toy soldiers—unless the prioritisation is clear.

That must be true also for our European allies. They are coming to the commitment conference, one hopes, with their own proposals. If these are not new capabilities and are not dedicated to the Helsinki headline goal—we are told that that will not be the approach—they, too, will be double-hatting or triple-hatting. Again, we need to know what the prioritisation is.

That is the most important issue to be discussed this afternoon. Enormously important decisions will be taken and tremendous risks will be run if we get it wrong. If, after all the time-consuming meetings in Brussels, Paris and Nice, after the good dinners and the self-congratulatory speeches and toasts, we come up with not a single new ship, aircraft, tank, weapons system or infantry unit; if all that we are doing is double-hatting, triple-hatting or quadruple-hatting existing units and assets; if we do not even have a prioritisation programme; and if people say, "We are not going to do any more by way of increasing our capability, and what is more, we will turn up on the day only if we feel like it, on a

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good day, and if we have nothing better to do with our forces at that moment", the entire exercise will be seen to have been a thoroughgoing fraud.

That will bring with it enormous dangers, not least if the Americans see that the exercise is a thoroughgoing fraud. The Government may be totally incompetent but they are dealing, sadly, with matters that carry very high stakes. If, instead of enhancing the cohesion and solidarity of the Atlantic alliance, the exercise begins to undermine American confidence in European commitments and promises, the Government will have presided over the undermining of that great achievement, the Atlantic alliance, which, ironically, was created by a Labour Government—the Labour Government of Attlee and Bevin—with the very strong support of Churchill and the Opposition of that time, and the support of every Conservative Government since that time.

If that happens, the Government will not merely stand condemned before the Bar of history for simple, banal, muddling incompetence. They will be accused of having perpetrated a monumental historical disaster.

3.43 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) reminded me of some advice that I received from a fellow parliamentarian, to the effect that one should use the word "finally" several times during a speech because it excites expectations. Those expectations were at last fulfilled. Like other colleagues, I imagine, after the speeches from the two Front Benches I feel a little breathless, so I shall speak more slowly and gather pace as I develop my theme.

Both sides have expressed enormous admiration for the quality of our armed services, one of the great groups of excellence that we still retain. I like to think that the Bar is another. Both sides also recognise that it is a privilege to speak in a defence debate. Although we are a minority group, and fewer and fewer parliamentarians have a direct knowledge of life in the services, there is still a considerable degree of expertise.

Since 1989, there has been a fundamental change in the defence environment in the world and particularly in Europe. All the old certainties have gone—the static defence in central Europe—with the logistic and equipment implications which follow from that. In yesterday's debate, it was the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), I think, who mentioned "upholders". That is symbolic of the nature of the change.

There is, for example, a new Russian military doctrine. There are currently as many surface ships in the Russian as in the British fleet. I do not mention submarines, but that aspect is also very different. The changes are not confined to Europe. As a result of the change in African policy, there are more French soldiers in the Balkans—in Bosnia and Kosovo—than in the whole of Africa. There is thus a sea change in priorities for us and our European allies.

We must learn to adjust. That is difficult for many of us, who learned and experienced our defence in earlier decades. We are light years away from a scenario in which there may be a significant conventional article 5 threat to NATO territory. As we hear in so many debates, the word "security" is much more widely defined. In the past, security meant military and political matters; now, it is extended to organised crime, migration and the environment.

All that is the background to my remarks about the nature of the Atlantic alliance and the potential strains in that alliance. I shall also follow the remarks of the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) about parliamentary scrutiny of defence in Europe. I begin with the United States' role and the relationships between the United States and the European Union in the defence field.

For us, part of the adjustment relates to the projections that we make about how the US will relate to Europe over the next decade and beyond. The US is the sole super-power, and there is a perceived need for greater European co-ordination in defence. That is an old issue—we discussed it in the Harmel debate in the 1970s. In the Brussels summit communiqué of the early 1990s, there was an emphasis on the European contribution.

That is a serious debate, which is not helped at national level by the anti-Europeanism expressed from the Opposition Front Bench and widely within the Opposition. I was waiting to hear whether the word "Europe" would be allowed to escape from the lips of the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford, who, if not the last of the Mohicans, is perhaps the last of the Europeans on the Opposition Front Bench. I did hear the word, at least towards the end of his speech.

For the Conservative Opposition, 10 October was a rather sad day, because of the unhappy coincidence that the shadow Foreign Secretary gave a speech in Paris to IFRI—the French equivalent of Chatham House—in which he spoke about the new European defence arm as a harmful and pointless project driven by what he called a "cancer of anti-Americanism".

Alas, the telephone had not rung between Paris and Birmingham. Just a few hours before that speech, William Cohen, the US Secretary of State for Defence, said in Birmingham that

> it is right and natural that an increasingly integrated Europe seeks to develop its own Security and Defense Policy with the military capability to back it up. Let me be clear on America's position: we agree with this goal—not grudgingly, not with resignation, but with wholehearted conviction.

In seeking to gloss over that, the Opposition have been forced to rely on some rather dated remarks made in Chatham House last September by Strobe Talbot, and on something that was said at the press conference, with which most of us agree—that there should not be a duplication across the board in planning between the EU and the US.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Does the hon. Gentleman also recall that Strobe Talbot's lecture at Chatham House was based on the proposition that while there should be a European security and defence identity, certain conditions had to be satisfied? These were not obstacles, but rather conditions to be satisfied, in the context of which an ESDP was entirely sensible.

Mr. Anderson: I was there and I remember what was said. The whole tenor of the Strobe Talbot presentation was positive, but the Conservative Opposition chose to extract a single sentence that could be construed as being negative. We have the very words of the current United

States Secretary of State for Defence, uttered hours before the expression of a visceral anti-Europeanism that cannot be in our national interest. Even *The Times* reluctantly carried the headline, "Tory tirade falls flat as US backs European force". Let that speak for itself.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman is perhaps guilty of the offence of which he accuses the Opposition—of being selective in what he chooses to report. The press conference that took place afterwards criticised the report on the basis of its suggestion that the American Secretary of State for Defence had changed his position. He said that he had not, and that he had deep misgivings. Incidentally, he had mentioned those misgivings in a section of his speech that was not reported in *The Times*.

Mr. Anderson: If it was clear that he had not changed his position, he must have been in favour of the proposal in the past. The words speak for themselves. I have a copy of the speech here, and have highlighted key sections. If the hon. Gentleman has not read it, I will pass it to him. Anyone placing an objective construction on it will see that it is very positive about burden sharing in the alliance and the new EU initiative.

The only part of the speech on which the Opposition can rely—in fact, I agree with this—is the part that suggests that there should be no duplication of planning facilities across the board. The US Secretary of State for Defence said:

> We hope to establish that if NATO and the UN were to proceed along the path of relying on autonomous force and planning structures

they should not duplicate those facilities.

It is impossible to identify any serious contradiction between what the European Union—as stated—is doing and the positive reaffirmation in that speech.

Mr. Brazier: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Anderson: No, because others wish to speak—and I hope that the hon. Gentleman does not claim that the United States is now giving a gut negative response to EU developments.

Mr. Brazier *rose—*

Mr. Anderson: I really must proceed with my speech.

There are clearly uncertainties in the long term about the US commitment to Europe. The debate will not be resolved by next week's presidential election, but the results of that election will obviously influence the trend.

We in Europe are fortunate in that, over the years, we have benefited from an Atlanticist US foreign and defence policy establishment. We benefited enormously even during the Falklands conflict, when Mrs. Kirkpatrick tried to steer policy more towards the hispanics because of demographic trends. Some day those trends will catch up with us.

We see echoes of that in what has been said by Condoleezza Rice, Governor Bush's senior national security adviser. On 21 October, for example, *The New York Times* reported her as saying that

> If elected president, George W. Bush plans to tell NATO that the United States should no longer participate in peacekeeping in the Balkans.

Apparently, NATO's Secretary-General is saying that that would have an unravelling effect.

Condoleezza Rice told the newspaper:

> The governor is talking about a new division of labor . . . And extended peacekeeping detracts from our readiness for these kinds of global missions.

She clearly underestimated the negative reaction in Europe. This raises questions about the future policy of the US under a Bush Administration.

Mr. Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Anderson: No, I really must make progress. I may give way later.

National missile defence is one of the possible strains on the alliance that loom. A report published in July by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs stated that a United Kingdom refusal to allow the upgrading of Fylingdales would be

> unprecedented and prove very testing for the alliance.

It "would have profound consequences" for our bilateral relations.

There has been a delay. The policy of Governor Bush is said to represent, possibly, a more ambitious project involving expensive sea-based plans. Is the NMD policy defence industry driven? Will the US listen to the serious concerns that are being expressed in Europe? What—I ask this in the light of the speech made yesterday by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife—will be the effects on the anti-ballistic missile treaty?

That depends partly on an assessment of whether Russia is prepared to deal, or is absolutist in its opposition to NMD. I know that the right hon. Member for East Devon attended a meeting at which it was suggested that the Russians would try to extract the best deal that they could. The analogy is given of Russian opposition to German reunification until the price is paid. It is a dangerous possibility—and, of course, behind Russia is China. We must ask again whether, given the new rapprochement or at least thaw between the US and North Korea, the perceived threat will be reduced to such an extent that the US will be able to draw certain conclusions about NMD.

Let us return to Europe. The policy of the European Union will develop—pace the Conservatives—and will apparently have US understanding if it is clearly based on NATO as the core of our security. It will involve the use of US assets, which have been promised, as well as a necessary burden sharing in the spirit of St. Malo. The tasks will be limited peacekeeping and crisis management.

My hesitations about the EU initiative derive from two issues. First, as is frequently pointed out, it is easier to make grand declarations than to pay the money to support them. Although there has been a marginal increase in UK defence expenditure following the comprehensive spending review in July, that has not been matched by our European allies, much to NATO's concern.

My second worry relates to the problems of intelligence within the proposed European structure. The culture of the EU consists of transparency, openness to citizens and, indeed, leaking. The culture of intelligence and the military is secrecy, if matters are to proceed properly. We heard echoes of the problem facing the EU when we learned that it had no building that was secure. There was

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also the problem of interpreters who refused to be positively vetted in respect of defence matters. We now learn that the European Parliament has made a submission to the European Court of Justice against the 14 August decision of the European Council to forbid public access to classified documents.

That suggests that many of our good colleagues in the European Parliament are living in a very different world if they expect Europe to have a proper defence role and are unwilling to follow that through in terms of the classification of documents. We in national Parliaments have reached various forms of modus vivendi with our Executives in that respect. They are not always satisfactory, but the European Parliament and European institutions must learn that the culture of intelligence is very different from the culture of openness.

I end with two matters. The first is NATO enlargement. When we project United States relations with the European Union, we have to ask, "Which Europe?" We know that there is a possibility of NATO enlargement in 2002, and that many countries are anxious to join the alliance. That applies not only to Slovenia, which was an unfortunate victim in the previous enlargement, but to Baltic countries. They pose special problems. For example, Estonia has been a model country in terms of the membership action plan. It has done all that can be required and more. Yet, in the current sensitive circumstances, it is difficult to envisage a rapid move towards including Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the alliance. Perhaps incorporating them in the European Atlantic structures will have to begin with the European Union.

Secondly, I want to consider the important point that the right hon. Member for East Devon made yesterday. In our democracies, we must have informed debate about and scrutiny of defence. That is done reasonably effectively by our national Parliaments: in this country, in the Chamber and by our excellent Select Committee on Defence and the objective reports that it produces. However, nowadays, few of us have done national service and the Army is shrinking, and there is a danger of the military separating itself from civil society. We must find ways in which to bridge that gap.

The Foreign Secretary told the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs that he views the European developments as essentially intergovernmental. That means that national Parliaments must get together on some basis. I agree that the European Parliament should be included, but not as a first among equals. If there is to be adequate scrutiny of developments in the European Union, we already have the Western European Union Assembly. It will continue because it exists through the Western European Union treaty and does a reasonably effective job.

In the first six months of next year, there will be a happy convergence because Sweden will chair the European Union and the Netherlands will hold the presidency of WEU. The Netherlands is keen for an in-depth examination of the key parliamentary dimension. It wants the subject to be on the agenda at Nice. The French are resisting that because of the danger of overloading the agenda. However, I urge my right hon. Friends to support the Dutch at Nice to ensure that a marker is at least put down and that the subject is firmly on the agenda.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting and important contribution. The enormous merit of the WEU Assembly, of which I have the privilege of being a member, is that it includes representatives of the national Parliaments of 28 European countries, with various statuses. It includes the Ukrainians, and representatives of the Baltic states—regions of critical importance to overall European security, which cannot be viewed simply in a European Union context.

Mr. Anderson: The hon. Gentleman is a distinguished member of that Assembly, and I listen to his comments with respect. I am sure that he will agree that the new developments mean that the European Parliament must be linked into the process in some way. However, we cannot simply have a six-monthly meeting of those who chair Defence and Foreign Affairs Committees, which Mr. Brock, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, wants. That would be wholly inadequate. We must build on the strength of the WEU Assembly. Hence the importance of placing it on the agenda at Nice and fully discussing it in the first six months of next year.

The Prime Minister made an important speech in Warsaw, where he discussed a second chamber for the European Parliament. As he said, that second chamber could cover defence and security matters. However, another intergovernmental conference will not be held until at least 2004; with ratification, we are considering 2005. In the important interim period, we must seriously discuss democratic scrutiny of defence within Europe and in the context of the co-ordination of European countries. I urge the Government to join our Dutch colleagues to ensure that the matter is firmly on the agenda.

4.5 pm

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. As other hon. Members have done yesterday and today, I begin by paying tribute to the members of Her Majesty's armed forces. They are some of the finest trained and led forces in the world. I especially associate myself with the remarks from the three Front Benches on the death of Bombardier Brad Tinnion, who was buried in my constituency only a few weeks ago. His service with 22SAS again shows that that regiment has been in the front line on more than one occasion in the past 12 months. It is an example of the very best of the very best, and I pay tribute to it.

I welcome many of the comments of the Minister for the Armed Forces, who is sadly no longer in his place. I especially welcome the new arrangement that he announced today between Rolls-Royce and the Defence Aviation Repair Agency. My late father trained with Rolls-Royce and served with RAF ground crew during the second world war. He knew then as we know today about the close links between the RAF and Rolls-Royce. I am sure that the announcement will be welcomed by Rolls-Royce and the RAF.

I also welcome the Minister's comments about the local use of credit cards in procurement. It works on bases and means that people can acquire equipment locally and

source it more effectively and efficiently. I also welcome the increase in internet use by members of the armed forces.

The Minister was also right to praise flag officer sea training—FOST. I have been to Plymouth and, like other hon. Members, have undergone a Thursday war to see the efficient way in which our Royal Navy works. FOST is one of the key training elements of western navies. It is extremely useful and successful, and its use of NATO and other diesel-electric submarines—we have none of our own and sadly, we now have only one nuclear submarine—is a common feature of FOST.

The Prime Minister said that a memorial would be dedicated to the men and women killed in the troubles in Northern Ireland. On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I express our gratitude for that. We look forward to its establishment.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) thanked the Government for the access that he and his colleagues have to military establishments. I echo that on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. It is an important part of our democratic procedures that not only defence spokesmen, but all Members of Parliament, have the sort of access that we are afforded. I thank Ministers and officials, who also play an important role, for that.

On one of the points that the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) made, we have a problem in Britain and perhaps in Parliament with the connection between general society and our armed forces. The hon. Gentleman rightly said that fewer and fewer people have served in Her Majesty's armed forces. I never have. However, when I was in Kosovo recently, a senior member of the Royal Green Jackets said that they preferred defence spokesmen who had never served in the armed forces because they came to the job with no preconceptions. That is not a criticism of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), but there is some truth in the remark.

The new intake of Members of Parliament shows that there is increasingly less connection with the armed forces. In yesterday's debate, only one member of 1997 intake made a speech. The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) spoke very well. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made some important contributions, and I contributed. I see that the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) is in his place. Perhaps we will hear from him later. My party is as bad as the others. Members of the new intake do not have the same connection to the armed forces that others had in the past. It is therefore important that the armed forces parliamentary scheme works well. I am a proud graduate of that scheme—I am wearing the scheme's tie today.

I pay tribute to Sir Neil Thorne for his excellent work over many years on the scheme. It is notable that when Lord Robertson became Secretary of State for Defence after the general election, the number of people involved in the scheme was increased from two hon. Members for the Army, the Navy, the Air Force and the Marines to five hon. Members for each of those services. However, it is sometimes difficult to fill those places with new or experienced hon. Members. By its very nature, the armed forces parliamentary scheme is geared towards hon. Members who already have an interest in defence. So the Government should take a lead in making defence more relevant, particularly to newer, younger hon. Members who may have a constituency interest or an interest in the cadet services or the Territorial Army.

I turn to another parliamentary group—the defence study group. I went to Germany with that group and the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), who is not in his place, has also been associated with it. The defence study group is funded by the Ministry of Defence, but is largely based in another place. There is an important need for it to become more involved with the House of Commons and to encourage a greater interest in defence matters. That also applies to the wider community.

The Minister mentioned the cadet forces which comprise 128,000 young people. He paid tribute to the adult instructors and I join him in that. I was honoured to take the salute of the Severn branch Trafalgar Day celebrations in Ross-on-Wye in my constituency last weekend. I met 120 or so sea cadets from all over the south west. They were there because they wanted to become involved in the Royal Navy and the adults that instructed them and looked after them were doing a fine job. However, the cadet services remain short of resources. I have been told by sea cadet groups how difficult they find warship visits. Perhaps the Minister could ensure that when there are ship visits around the coast of our country and at places such as the Pool of London, where HMS Belfast is based, sea cadet groups all over the country are informed of those visits and given an opportunity to visit these ships.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does not the declining interest in defence reflect the widespread belief that as a subject defence is of less political salience than was once the case? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the crucial point is that although the sources of the threat to our national security might have changed, the fact of it has not?

Mr. Keetch: The hon. Gentleman is right. I was born in 1961 and I was brought up to suspect that there might be a war with Russia. That has changed since the end of the cold war, but the threats to our society, internationally and technologically, through terrorism and different types of warfare, are greater now than they have ever been. We must engage young people in particular and make them understand that those current and increasing threats did not affect previous generations.

We need to ensure that cadet forces have proper access to military assets throughout the United Kingdom. We also need to ensure that cities and communities continue to be associated with the armed forces. I am surprised at the decline in the number of twinnings between warships and cities and communities. The city of Hereford lost its ship HMS Antelope, which was sunk in the Falklands. Every other city connection with ships sunk in the Falklands has been re-established with other vessels, but Hereford has not.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Why not?

Mr. Keetch: The Minister asks why not. I have written to him before to ask him about that. Perhaps he will investigate. Those twinnings where forces marched through the streets with bayonets fixed are very important.

[Mr. Keetch]

Particularly as the armed forces are declining, we need to ensure that those connections are maintained and developed.

I now turn to Gulf war syndrome which was mentioned in yesterday's debate. The hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) drew attention to the difference between the announcement made the other day about compensation for new-variant CJD victims and the way in which successive Governments have dealt with Gulf war syndrome. There have been approximately 80 deaths resulting from new-variant CJD. We deplore that and we welcome the compensation, but there have been up to 400 deaths as a result of Gulf war syndrome and as yet there has been no public inquiry. I am not saying that one is needed, but the Government should consider the kind of no-fault interim compensation that was paid to haemophiliacs. We welcome the fact that some 7,500 former Japanese prisoners of war may receive some compensation. I hope that the victims of Gulf war syndrome do not have to wait as long as they have.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I have taken an interest in former Japanese prisoners of war and have been a member of the all-party group for more years than I care to remember with no progress whatever being made. Has the hon. Gentleman had any indication that we are likely to get what we have sought for so long?

Mr. Keetch: The Prime Minister mentioned this very recently. I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his work. My hon. Friends the Members for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) and for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) have also made important progress on this. It has genuinely been an all-party group. If there is an announcement next week, I am sure that it will be welcomed by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Let me turn to two other issues that have been exercising people recently. The Minister's review of the position of the gardeners is welcome, particularly as possible cuts in the number of gardeners were announced at the same time as news of £340 million being spent on MOD upgrades. Perhaps it was unfortunate timing. We certainly welcome that. I also congratulate the Minister on his response to an Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall yesterday concerning the protection of graves at sea on HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse. There has been concern among hon. Members on both sides of the House that international protection is required.

I have one final point about Gulf war syndrome. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) has passed on to me a letter dated 26 October this year from a gentleman in Hampshire who is a Gulf war veteran. It would be wrong for me to name him as I have been unable to contact him, so I shall use his words without identifying him. He writes:

> Many Veterans are now suffering Illnesses and Disabilities which, as time goes on, leave them more and more incapable to carry on with normal life . . . The Government has recently announced a compensation package for Victims of CJD, and quite rightly so . . . But if you look at the figures . . . we are still suffering . . . The Government has stated on many occasions that it is doing all it can to help Gulf Veterans, but I can assure you that this is not true

I hope that this matter will be dealt with.

Let me now say a few words about procurement. We had a long and interesting debate on the subject last week, but I wish to comment on what the Secretary of State said yesterday. Just after my intervention on the type 45, he said that the type 45 will have

> a vertical launcher suitable for a variety of weapons including Tomahawk.—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2000; Vol.355, c. 728.]

My hon. Friends and I have been calling for that for some time, even when in May the Secretary of State said that there were no plans for the type 45 to have a land attack capability. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has changed his mind and that he is listening in to us.

I also welcome the announcements on shipbuilding. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife has said on more than one occasion that the judgment of Solomon is needed in relation to shipbuilding orders. The balance was broadly right in respect of the orders that were announced last week, but there are some serious disadvantages. The shipyards in Appledore in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) has not yet received anything. I hope that the Government will ensure that the United Kingdom retains a variety of shipyards throughout the country with the ability to build warships. Mention has already been made of the carriers and the aircraft to go on them. Of course, any aircraft carrier is only as good as the aircraft that it carries. We therefore look forward to the decision on whether we will continue with the joint strike fighter. We must ensure that, in choosing our carriers, we do not do what we did with the Invincible class and choose something that is too small and cannot carry enough aircraft. We must consider what size our carriers are going to be.

I shall move on to an element of procurement that I mentioned in our debate last week, namely the use of the Duro vehicle for the vertical communications system, about which I have tabled parliamentary questions today, as the Minister will have noticed. May I refresh the memories of hon. Members who were in the House last week as well as those who were not.

Dr. Moonie: This is the hon. Gentleman's hobby horse.

Mr. Keetch: The Minister says that the system is a hobby horse of mine, but it is £8 million-worth of hobby horse, and I am trying to get a few answers on it. Indeed, I wrote to the Secretary of State about the matter on 10 October, but have still not had an adequate answer.

We are building a new kind of vertical communications system that will go in the back of a vehicle and will be deployed on a Hercules or a C-17 to support our forces. Used in earnest, I suppose that it is the kind of communication system which, on the battlefield, would be next to headquarters. Having made a decision and put down a specification for the system, the Government have chosen two suppliers, but have allowed them both to choose which vehicle they want. For some reason, instead of choosing a Land Rover, an Alvis or a Leyland Daf, they chose a vehicle from Switzerland. In his reply to me last week, the Minister said:

> The vertical communications system is based on the Duro vehicle which was proposed to the competitors because no other vehicle has the configuration to take the system and still be transportable by air.—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 486.]

I must press the Minister on that. Is he saying that those vehicles are so unique that they could not be produced by Land Rover or Leyland Daf? If they are so unique,

why are 2,000 of them left doing nothing in Switzerland and why has no other nation bought them? We need to find out why £8 million is being spent on a Swiss vehicle, when UK vehicles probably could have been sourced.

If we get into service in the British Army a vehicle that may be cheap, but has not gone through any evaluations or testing that Land Rovers and Leyland Dafs have to go through, it will become part of the Army's green fleet and will be available to be bought by other NATO nations without having been tested first. That is why I have tabled seven questions on the matter.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I want to make sure that I am clear about what the hon. Gentleman has said. I presume that he is not advocating that the British Army and the Ministry of Defence should not seek the best value for money on each contract. If they have to buy overseas, they should do so, as that is in the best interests of the armed forces. Work should not be directed unnecessarily to the UK, as that costs the MOD money and takes money away from UK equipment.

Mr. Keetch: The hon. Gentleman is right that we should go for best value for money. However, time and again in the House we hear of substandard equipment that is not up to the job. I would like to know under what specification the vehicle was ordered and whether other UK manufacturers had an opportunity to tender, as some of them say that they did not. I would certainly like some answers about that contract.

Regarding procurement, Bowman was announced yesterday. We should not hold our breath on Bowman, about which there has been a long, arduous tale, but the Government have, at long last, acted. I do not agree with those who say that £200 million was wasted on the project, as some of the money that has already been spent could be used in future developments. That is what the Minister said last week, for which I pay him handsome tribute.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford spoke about recruitment, but he rushed over the matter, saying that recruitment figures are good. It is true that there is record recruitment and 25,000 people are coming in. However, one area of recruitment is sadly not right—our armed forces' ability to recruit people from our ethnic minorities. The proportion of ethnic minorities in our armed forces is currently hovering at only about 1 per cent and recruiters have failed to reach Government targets.

I have recently attended several recruitment fairs in my constituency and elsewhere that have been organised by branches of the armed forces. Those evenings are enjoyable. They bring together business people, local councillors and members of the community and are undoubtedly successful. However, they clearly do not reach the members of our ethnic communities, which they should be doing. The Government are now recruiting in Fiji, where many excellent members of the armed forces come from, and perhaps the best loved regiment in our armed forces is the Gurkhas. Ironically, however, we are unable to recruit large numbers of people from ethnic communities in our own cities. Whatever the Government's policy is, clearly it is not working, so I hope that they will look again at their recruitment methods in that area.

Retention is a major problem and yesterday we heard a lot about the problem of married quarters. In the continuous attitude survey for service leavers, the effect of service on family life was the most frequently cited reason for leaving the armed services. Whether or not we have served in the armed forces, we all know that that effect is huge, but much could be done to improve it. Like Conservative Front-Bench Members, I welcome Government moves which have begun to change the ethos, and congratulate the Government on that.

However, the Government could do more, such as setting a minimum consistent standard that could be applied to facilities in all garrison bases. Why do some bases have huge sports halls, while others do not? Surely, we should have a national audit of our bases and should try to ensure that there is a common standard for the kind of facilities that they have. We should review the qualification for married quarters to include permanent partnerships, abolish the current march-in, march-out regulations and replace the contract cleaning of voids paid from an element of rent. We should review the moving and relocation allowances, ensure that pay for them is better and ring-fence funding for family support. For every family on every base, there should be a family officer able to look after the care of armed forces.

We have heard from Members on both sides of the House that we have the best armed forces in the world. We are recruiting them well, they are being equipped well—and I hope, equipped better—but, if they continue to leave, our ability to do what we have done over the past few months will end. Retention is crucial to our armed forces, and, although the Government are starting to move ahead, there is still a long way to go.

4.27 pm

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I apologise for not being here yesterday, but there is serious flooding in my constituency. The river Roding has burst its banks and I had to visit a number of my constituents and see the damage to their homes.

I speak as a member of the Select Committee on Defence, and it is important to put on the record the fact that our Chairman my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George) could not participate in our debate, as he is on parliamentary duty in Hungary. He asked that that information be conveyed to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I also have a constituency interest in some matters that have been discussed. As a member of the Defence Committee, I welcome yesterday's announcement on Bowman. However, as Member of Parliament for Ilford, South, yesterday was a sad day for me because it confirmed what has been apparent for a long time.

My constituents were supposed to manufacture the new system. According to the Archer consortium, the designated manufacturing site was going to be the former Plessey site in Ilford where in 1948, 10,000 people were making defence equipment. In the second world war there were bomb attacks all round Ilford to try to hit the Plessey factory and its underground tunnels. Ultimately, that factory was bought by Siemens and then British Aerospace. Following British Aerospace's failure to deliver on the Archer project, and the way in which the work force in my constituency were sold an illusion that there would be 700, 800 or perhaps even 1,000 jobs for many years, BAE Systems, having acquired several other factories in the Essex and Kent area, announced that it was restructuring its operations and that from February, the Ilford site would be closed.

That means the end of my constituency's continuous 80-year association with defence manufacturing. It must be placed on the record that Ilford and people living in

[Mr. Mike Gapes]

Ilford made a major contribution to the defence of the United Kingdom through their work in the defence industries over many years. It is sad that it has come to this—which is the fault not of the present Government but of the fiasco of the Bowman project, its delays and all the things that are dealt with in the Select Committee's report on major procurement projects. We are not discussing that today, but I must place the fact on the record.

I intervened on the Minister on a point arising from the inquiry that we conducted into Operation Bolton and the no-fly zones in Iraq. The Committee's report and the Government's response are among the documents that are available for the debate. When we visited the facilities in Kuwait, the Ali Al Salem air base, we saw the great contrast in facilities in the region. There is an enormous contrast between the facilities that our personnel have to inhabit there and the facilities available to the personnel of the United States and to our personnel in Saudi Arabia.

I know that the Secretary of State has seen that; he has visited the region. I know that pressure has been applied and discussions have been held with the Kuwaiti Government about the standard of accommodation. In his response, the Minister said that things would improve soon. The facilities are not British Government-owned property. The building has been made available by the Kuwaiti Government for use by our personnel, but it is not adequate. The washing and sleeping facilities resembled the worst kind of 1930s hospital accommodation. They did not look in any way adequate, particularly given the extreme temperatures in Kuwait. It will be a pleasant day when we finally get good accommodation for our service personnel, who are doing a vital job in Kuwait in enforcing the no-fly zones against Saddam Hussein's brutal, expansionist and fascist regime.

I shall spend much of my time talking about European defence and the lessons arising from the Kosovo report that the Select Committee published the week before last—but before I do that, may I concur with the remarks of the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) about ethnic minority recruitment. The Select Committee has just started another inquiry into armed forces personnel. Yesterday we took evidence from the air marshal, the second sea lord and other leading figures in the armed forces about recruitment of ethnic minorities and women to the respective services.

One important issue is how we get young people from inner cities, and from cities generally, to go into the armed forces. There is good ethnic minority recruitment to the cadet services, yet that has not yet been translated through. We need to find role models in our armed forces. For example, the United States had Colin Powell. We need people in senior positions in our forces and services who act in the same way as people have in the media and, increasingly, in other professions, including the judiciary. Even in the Metropolitan police, senior black and Asian figures are coming through.

In the armed forces, we must have that relatively soon. If we do not, we will not tap into the great interest that might exist among many of our black and Asian British citizens. They might recognise that interest if they could see that they would not suffer discrimination and ostracism by the people that they had to work with, but would be able to progress to senior positions in our armed services.

Mr. Blunt: I hope that the hon. Gentleman does not expect the armed forces to turn things round overnight. I know that under the current Administration, huge efforts are going into that area. I welcome the results in the Army cadet force, which will lead into Army recruitment—but inevitably, it will be a gradual process. It was a priority of Sir Malcolm Rifkind when he was Secretary of State for Defence. Policies were put in place then, particularly with regard to the Household Division, but do not expect the proportion to go from 1 per cent. to 5 or 10 per cent.—which is probably a more realistic figure, representing the size of the young population—immediately. I know that the armed forces are trying. Let us please give them credit for what they are doing.

Mr. Gapes: It is important to recognise that change will take time, but the problem we face is that the targets set by the armed forces themselves are not yet being met. The inquiry that our Committee is establishing will investigate the reasons, and I hope that we will be able to discuss it. That is not a criticism of the leadership of the services or the MOD. There is a new commitment under this Government in terms of targets, encouragement and recruitment, but we must address the other barriers.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): My hon. Friend is right. Targets on recruitment have not been met, but is he aware—I am sure that the Select Committee is aware of it—that the promotion of black and ethnic minority service men to higher ranks is very rare? There are very few at a high level in the services. There is a need for further investigation into the issue of promotion.

Mr. Gapes: That is one of the issues that the Select Committee will consider. We have just begun the new inquiry, and I hope that in a few months' time, we will be able to have a whole debate on it.

In yesterday's debate, there was a lot of what I can only describe as hysterical Europhobia with regard to European security and defence identity, or European security and defence policy. I was surprised by the comments of the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), who seems to have been reincarnated as a rabid Eurosceptic. In his previous incarnation, he always struck me as one of the most pro-European Conservatives. Perhaps, to preserve their position in the modern Conservative party, Members take the view that they must make over-the-top, hysterical remarks about all things European.

The Kosovo conflict, and the Select Committee's recent report, drew attention to the fact that if we are to be serious about defence matters in Europe, we must address a number of important operational and equipment questions. It appears from the evidence that we received and from our conclusions that, basically, the Europeans cannot operate in any way in any conflict situation without the involvement of the United States.

Paragraph 313 of the report says:

> Overall, Operation Allied Force demonstrated just how far the European NATO nations are from having a capability to act without massive US support. This deficit is recognised and acknowledged by the European Allies, and some measures are in hand to address

the major shortfalls under NATO's Defence Capabilities Initiative. Kosovo reminded us just how critical it is that this programme is backed by political will and adequate financial resources. Its successful implementation will also demand a high level of European political co-operation.

I would welcome it if the Conservative party became part of that European political co-operation and consensus in trying to make our defence capabilities in Europe more effective. In my opinion, the greatest threat to the future of European defence and to NATO does not come from Europe or any European politician, but from the election platform of the United States Republican party. I suggest that anyone who doubts that goes on to the internet and clicks on the policy positions adopted by the Republicans over the past three or four years, and on the speeches of Condoleezza Rice, who is the senior policy adviser to George W. Bush. I hope that if that party's policy is implemented, sense will prevail among the American electorate or the wiser heads in the State Department and the Defence Department. If they go ahead with ballistic missile defence, they will cause the worst crisis in relations between Europe and the United States that we have seen for more than 20 years.

I am not encouraged by the remarks of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), the shadow defence spokesman, who seems to be whipping up hostility to the idea of Europe increasing its defence capabilities, and acts as a cheerleader for the unilateral deployment of ballistic missile defence—which we know will have serious consequences for relations between the United States, Russia and China, and for the future of arms control, the strategic arms reduction treaties and many other things. That worries me enormously, especially given Russia's key role in ending the Kosovo conflict, to which the Select Committee referred in its report, and the key role of diplomatic efforts, in co-ordination with Russia, if we are to achieve a transformed Balkans that can become part of Europe.

The geographical position of Serbia is central to those efforts, and our relations, as west Europeans, with Russia are crucial in influencing what happens between the Serbs and their neighbours. The last thing that we need now is global unilateralism from the United States, which encourages conservatism and reaction in Russia, which then leads to irredentist positions among the Serbs and their neighbours in the Balkans. That would be an absolute disaster.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, talked about NATO enlargement and widening European security. We should now seize the opportunity presented by the half-completed revolution in Serbia and the democratic transition following the death of the fascist Tudjman in Croatia. I was in Croatia in June and met many far-sighted, good people there. The Croatian Government have invited Serbs back to Krajina and are standing up to the hard right. Even though they are a fragile coalition Government, they are doing their very best. We need to encourage those forces.

That requires the United States to be engaged in Europe, not to withdraw its forces unilaterally from Bosnia or the Kosovo area—contrary to what George W. Bush seems to want. We need both wings of NATO—its European pillar and the United States—to work together with the Russians to rebuild security in the Balkans region. Those issues are fundamental to the future of the defence policies that we, as a Government, bring forward during the next few years.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford referred to gratuitous United Nations involvement. I do not believe that our involvement in the UN is gratuitous. I do not believe that those unarmed British military observers whom the Select Committee met on the Iraq-Kuwait border, the UNSCOM mission, protected by Bangladeshi troops under an Irish commander, and including Senegalese, Russians, Americans and Canadians, are gratuitous. This country should be proud of that important international security and peacekeeping role.

Similarly, what we are doing in Sierra Leone is vital. We should be proud that we are saving black African children from having their arms mutilated and their heads cut off. We should be proud of the fact that when the UN has difficulties it comes to us and says, "Please help." It knows that we have professional armed forces and brave people who are prepared to put their lives at risk to provide international peace and security.

We need to talk not about "gratuitous" UN involvement, but about how to strengthen the UN. We need to talk about how we as a permanent member of the Security Council can work to strengthen the UN bodies that deal with such matters, so that we do not have to rely on NATO or regional alliances or coalitions of the willing, but can build permanent international structures for peace and security. The UN is important. The European defence capability initiative and the ESDP are important. Above all, none of that would be possible without the men and women of our armed forces and their families who support them.

4.46 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I am afraid that, like the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes), I, too, have to apologise for the fact that I was not in the Chamber yesterday. I was attending an important meeting in my constituency, which was called to consider some of the lingering consequences of world war two which still affect our part of Kent.

I want to take this opportunity to place on record the enormous pleasure that my constituents and I have had in recent months in welcoming the Gurkhas to their new quarters in Shorncliffe in my constituency. That welcome has been warm and genuine, and the Gurkhas have made an outstanding impression, as the House would expect. I have no doubt that they will be continue to be much valued members of our local community for a long time to come.

Next week, the United States will elect a new President. It is almost inevitable that the new Administration, whoever heads it, will want to review the United States contribution to the defence of Europe and the role of NATO. That review will take place at a time when the Atlantic partnership is under strain. That partnership has not only been good for Europe and north America but has been one of the greatest forces for good in the world as a whole during the past 50 years. It continues to have the potential to be a force for good during the next 50 years, but there are forces at work on both sides of the Atlantic that are tending to drive Europe and north America apart. Those forces of geography, demography and trading rivalry are deep-seated. If they are not to prevail, a considerable effort of political will needs to be mobilised.

[Mr. Michael Howard]

We must seek to minimise the points of friction, not to add to them. Yet at this critical time, the Government of the United Kingdom—which, under Governments of whichever political party has traditionally been the strongest promoter of that partnership—have embarked on a defence initiative that will, in my view, inevitably exacerbate the strains and increase the risks. The reasons for that adventure, which involves a complete Government U-turn, have never been explained.

After the Amsterdam Council, in June 1997—although my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) referred to this in yesterday's debate, it is important and bears repetition—the Prime Minister told the House:

> getting Europe's voice heard more clearly in the world will not be achieved through merging the European Union and the Western European Union or developing an unrealistic common defence policy. We therefore resisted unacceptable proposals from others.—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 314.]

I do not think that, when the Prime Minister said that, he was being hysterically Europhobic or rabidly Eurosceptic—to use the phrases just used by the hon. Member for Ilford, South. The only difference is that Conservative Members still think that what the Prime Minister said then was right. We think that he was being sensible. It is the Prime Minister and his Labour colleagues who now think that he was wrong, although they have yet to explain the reason for the change.

What we are now faced with is precisely what the Government resisted in 1997. The European Union and the Western European Union are to merge; the unrealistic common defence policy is to be developed; and the proposals which were unacceptable at Amsterdam and were to be resisted have now been embraced. We can only speculate on the reasons for the volte face. By far the most credible explanation is that the Prime Minister, frustrated by his inability to smuggle the United Kingdom into the single currency, and desperately casting round for some other way of establishing his credibility as a good European, identified defence as the only way forward.

Therefore, the Prime Minister signed up at St. Malo to defence co-operation "inside and outside" NATO. He also signed up to the Cologne declaration which calls for the European Union to

> have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces

and

> the means to decide to use them.

Since then, the Prime Minister has signed up to further agreements at Helsinki and at Feira in Portugal. At Helsinki, it was decided not only to develop autonomous European military capabilities, but to set up new European security institutions. Since Helsinki, we have seen the establishment of an interim political and security committee, an interim military committee and a military staff. All those are explicitly and deliberately set up outside the framework of NATO. They will duplicate structures that already exist in NATO. To what end?

Mr. Gapes *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I hope that the hon. Gentleman can provide an answer.

Mr. Gapes: Is it not a fact that, as the Select Committee concluded, all those new initiatives are about effective crisis management, and that they do not in any way duplicate or replace the continuation of work in NATO? Is not the main issue how we increase the ability to deploy 50,000 to 60,000 of the 2 million members of the forces in the European countries? That is what the initiatives are about.

Mr. Howard: All that can be done, and should be done, within the framework of NATO. There is absolutely no reason whatever why it cannot be done within the framework of NATO. That was what the Prime Minister told the House in 1997. I am wholly in favour of a more effective European defence effort. The European members of NATO should do much more than they do now to shoulder the burden of the alliance.

By far the most effective thing that most of the European members of NATO could do is to spend more money on defence and to spend it more sensibly. The majority of European Union countries now spend less than 2 per cent. of their gross domestic product on defence. Eight member states, including Germany and Spain, spend 1.6 per cent. or less on defence. The United States spends 3.2 per cent. of its GDP on defence. The very last thing that is needed in this set of circumstances is to fritter away those scarce resources on an unnecessary new set of bureaucratic arrangements that duplicate what we already have in NATO. Why is that being done?

Let us be clear about the logic behind the developments. The only set of circumstances in which the new capability could need to be used outside NATO and without recourse to NATO's assets would be in a situation in which the United States refused to allow those assets to be used, and not simply in a situation in which the United States itself did not want to get involved. In such a situation, the European members of NATO would be perfectly able to act within NATO and would be able to use NATO's command structure and NATO's relevant assets, but without the direct involvement of the United States. The only situation in which all those elaborate arrangements would be necessary is one in which the United States not merely did not wish to take part, but was prepared to veto any NATO involvement.

In the past 50 years, almost all our differences with other NATO members have been with other European members of the alliance, not with the United States. It was some of the other European members of the alliance who had difficulties over the Gulf war. It was the Belgians who refused to sell us bullets. It is with other European members of the alliance that we now—now—have differences over Iraq.

I have been trying to think of occasions in that period when we and other Europeans have wanted to take action that the United States might have wanted to veto if we had wanted to act through NATO. It may be that my memory has deceived me, but I can think of only one such example—Suez. Are the Government, with their

European partners, going to all this trouble so that Europe could mount another Suez campaign without the involvement of the United States?

Mr. Wilkinson: My right hon. and learned Friend has taken that question out of my mouth. His exposition is most cogent. Surely the great deficiency of Suez was that it was not squared with the Americans before the operation was undertaken, and that, without their wholehearted support throughout, it was doomed to failure from the start.

Mr. Howard: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

Mr. Gapes: I was also going to refer to Suez, but shall refer instead to the other example—the United States early sabotage of the Carrington-Cutileiro proposals, which might have led to a different outcome in Bosnia.

Mr. Howard: That is a matter of considerable controversy, and the interpretation that the hon. Gentleman puts on it is by no means universally accepted. I think that Bosnia could well have been an example of an instance in which the United States did not itself want to be actively involved, but would not have wanted to veto any involvement by the European members of the alliance. That is the way in which we could, and perhaps should, have proceeded in Bosnia.

The truth, of course, is that what is happening is the creation of a European army. It is all part of the drive towards a single European state. I am going to quote the President of the Commission. My hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green was too restrained to quote him yesterday, but I do not think that this debate would be complete if we did not place on record the view of the President of the European Commission—who was hand-picked by the Prime Minister for the job. The Prime Minister's candidate for the job has memorably said:

> When I was talking about the European army, I was not joking. If you don't want to call it a European army, don't call it a European army. You can call it Margaret. You can call it Mary-Ann.

The United States has, so far, reacted to these developments with dignity and tact. We all know that there is deep disquiet in private, but, in public, the comments have been measured. In the past, that has led to somewhat arid exchanges across the Floor of the House—some of which we saw earlier today. In the past, I myself have taken part in such exchanges, in which one speaker quotes one part of a speech from a senior American, and another speaker quotes another part. I do not want to engage in that type of terminological analysis today; I do, however, want to ask the Minister some very specific questions.

In his much-quoted speech of 10 October, quoted again by the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), United States Defence Secretary William Cohen proposed unifying the EU and NATO systems under a European security and defence planning system. He said:

> It would be highly ineffective, seriously wasteful of resources, and contradictory to the basic principles of close NATO EU co-operation that we hope to establish, if NATO and the EU were to proceed along the path of relying on autonomous force planning structures.
>
> Thus it is hard to conceive of any agreement based on logic, practicality, or effectiveness, that European Allies who are also EU members shall proceed along separate defence planning tracks—one within NATO, the other within the EU—to prepare for the same range of crisis response operations.

Yet that, surely, is exactly what is being done. Autonomous force planning structures are being set up, and separate defence planning tracks are being established. What is the Government's response to the reasonable concerns expressed by the United States Defence Secretary?

Mr. Donald Anderson: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is falling into his own trap in the matter of selective quotations. Mr. Cohen's starting point was a very warm response to the European developments that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is now dismissing. He quite properly said that there should not be duplication of planning staffs but he agreed that there should be a strategic planning staff at European level. That is precisely the policy that the Government are following. There is a debate within Europe, and others will want to go further, but it is surely wrong to dismiss those who voice a different opinion. We have made it clear that we do not want duplication, but the Americans themselves assume that Europe should have a planning function at a strategic level.

Mr. Howard: But it could all be done within NATO. If we do not want duplication, why have a political and a military committee, and a military staff outside NATO? They are, in essence and inevitably, duplicating functions that should remain in NATO. There is no need for them.

Mr. Anderson: The right hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned the Balkans. Miss Rice has made it clear that it may not be in the US strategic interest to be involved in the Balkans, but because of migration flows and the turbulence across frontiers, Europe certainly does have an interest there.

Mr. Howard: I accepted that a few moments ago. I accept that there may be situations—the Balkans may be an example—in which European members of NATO would want to get involved but the United States would not. That could all be done within the framework of NATO.

I have not quite finished with Mr. Cohen's speech. He went on to say that the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe—DSACEUR—should be at the heart of EU-NATO relations. In this, he was echoing our Defence Committee, which proposed that DSACEUR should have the right to attend all meetings of the European military committee. The Government's response to that proposal was typically disingenuous. They said:

> The Government agrees that DSACEUR's attendance at the EU Military Committee will, in many cases, be essential, not least to ensure transparency between the EU and NATO.

Of course, that was not agreement with the Defence Committee's proposal. It was not even an answer to it. I should be grateful if the Minister could listen for a moment, because I want an answer to this specific question: will DSACEUR have the right to attend all meetings of the European military committee, as proposed by the Defence Committee, and if not, why not?

Is it the case, as reported in *The Sunday Telegraph* this week, that the Government have conceded that the holder of the post of director general of the military staff should be French? Would not that symbolise the way in which the Government now dance to a French tune on these matters? Given France's history of ambivalence towards

[Mr. Howard]

NATO and the growing stridency of the anti-American rhetoric indulged in by French leaders, would not that give the clearest signal to the Americans of the real nature of this enterprise?

The Sunday Telegraph also suggested that Pentagon chiefs have made it clear that they would be unwilling to share intelligence data with the new EU alliance—another point touched on by the hon. Member for Swansea, East. I do not expect the Government to comment on intelligence matters, but is there not a real danger that that will indeed be the American position if these events proceed, especially given recent history, including what happened in the Kosovo campaign?

These are serious questions. I hope that we can have some answers. My charge against the Government is that they are jeopardising the relationship that has always stood our country, our continent and the world in good stead, by committing themselves to a wasteful, pretentious and ill-thought-through European enterprise. It may yet turn out to be their greatest act of treachery.

5.7 pm

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South): First, I apologise for my absence yesterday. I was listening to the debate but began to feel unwell, so I had to leave halfway through the opening speech of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence.

Let me make it clear how much I admire our British forces. Like the majority in Britain, I am very proud of their action and I believe that they make an outstanding contribution on our behalf throughout the world. I am more than pleased that the Government are acknowledging that and spending billions. This is the first time for many years that so much has been spent, and it is long overdue.

I want briefly to express my pleasure and pride in the fact that two of the amphibious landing craft are to be built in my region, in the north. That, alongside the order for tanks, has made people feel that they have a proud future in Great Britain in which they, too, will be seen as supporting the activities of our armed forces. I am pleased, of course, to have the opportunity to contribute to a debate on defence and the armed forces for the second time in a week. That gives me real pleasure.

My intention today is to welcome, although with great caution, the clear support that the Government are now giving to the principle of equal opportunities in the armed forces' selection and recruitment policy. At long last, that approach will give all people the right and opportunity to serve their country in many roles, although not 100 per cent. of roles are open to people in that way. I hope that, by the end of this Parliament or the beginning of the next, women will have the right to apply for selection for 100 per cent. of roles, and that fewer exclusion clauses will be put in their way.

I believe that people with the necessary talent and ability should be recognised and, if they are able to pass the rigorous selection criteria, they should be given the opportunity to serve. I am more than pleased that the Royal Air Force should have opened up 96 per cent. of all roles to women. The figure for the Army is 70 per cent., and for the Navy 73 per cent. That is a valid beginning to giving all those who choose to do so the opportunity to serve their country.

I am pleased that some people—although only some, as yet—are consigning to the dustbin the belief that only men can or should fight on the front line. The implicit belief has been that women are only able to care. I want to persuade the House that everyone, to varying degrees, is able both to fight and to care, and that recognition of that is long overdue.

Women were involved in active service in world war two. That fact has conveniently, been forgotten, by those who want to exclude women from 100 per cent. participation in the armed forces. It is shameful that only now is a formal commemorative statue to be built in remembrance of all the women who served in that conflict. Many women served on the front line in the second world war and many died, proud to give their lives for their country

Some hon. Members might claim that women are the weaker sex, that they must be protected, and that they represent a gender problem and a weak link in a combat team. They should read the accounts of those women who fought on active service between 1939 and 1945. If they did, they would be ashamed their wish to consign women to a secondary role rather than a primary one.

Convincing evidence of women's physical ability and dextrousness is evident in the work that women did in the munitions factories of the 1940s. The cosy, rosy picture of the little woman at home is also blown away by the history of the land army. The stereotypical perception of women is also called into serious question when one reads the history of mining. Women were miners and dug coal alongside men, and they participated in industry, education and politics. Despite their full achievement in all roles, women have been defined by some, conveniently and for far too long, in terms of the support given by "the back-room girl".

I remind the House—seriously but not entirely without humour—that behind every successful man there is often an even brighter and more convincing female. I am sad to say that successful women have to be twice as capable—and often twice as bright and determined—as the men with whom they compete.

The armed forces of tomorrow must not accommodate the stereotypical beliefs that I have described. Although I do not doubt that such beliefs are well meaning and serious, I know that women consider them to be patronising and undermining.

I am proud of the British armed forces, so I find it sad that sexism is writ large in the ethos of much of those forces. That sexism is perpetuated by the many who persist in regarding the forces as a man's world, where front-line combat—the acceptance of commands or roles that might cause one to die in action for one's country—is considered to be the right and prerogative of the male. My contention is that the approach of the armed forces should be that all people have the right and prerogative to choose to serve in roles that they fit and can accommodate. It is, of course, the right of the armed forces to select, without prejudice, people who have the talent, ability, suitability and the desire to serve. However, I believe that only when the selection process is fair as well as rigorous will the best be chosen.

There are, of course, changes taking place. The serious questions that impact on whether a woman should be allowed 100 per cent. participation in the armed forces are at last being asked. The Army is carrying out a study of

the effects on combat effectiveness of opening all roles to women. I warmly welcome this. I would not want any person to be selected for a role in the armed forces that they could not accommodate. I am assuming that the study will test and assess the extent to which combat roles are supported, disrupted or undermined by operating joint male and female forces. I believe that the tests used will assess whether mixed-gender forces will reduce the commitment of all in achieving the set target, which of course includes raising bayonets against an enemy or aggressor.

Valuable evidence—albeit not great in volume—from American studies and the Israeli army suggests that women in combat on the front line in action are as relevant to that action and show as much commitment to it as any male involved. That evidence is small in size but is a valued start with regard to providing evidence and information that will inform the debate on achieving equal opportunities in the armed forces. Inevitably, much is said about the training to achieve effective combat. Standards are set and they must be achieved if the Army is to survive any and all affronts.

People who participate in all parts of the armed forces have the talent and ability to do the job in hand. I am absolute in my belief that a commitment to equal opportunities must in no way compromise the performance of the force. Equally, I believe that a commitment to equal opportunities will not compromise the performance of the force. It is emphatically the case that when on active service in the Gulf or Kosovo, whether on a rescue or other mission, the whole team must be able to meet the standards required. There is no room, and there can never be any room, for a weak link. That fact is absolute. However, we must have knowledge about women's capabilities to judge whether they can maintain their combat roles under pressure. It is only when the roles are open to women and they are given a chance to prove their capabilities, to perform in training and under pressure, that we can assess accurately whether they should be selected for all front-line combat roles, such as in the Marines, in submarines or elsewhere.

The research provided for the Equal Opportunities Commission clearly states that equal opportunity becomes a valued tool when we recruit personnel. We must ensure that we define appropriate talent and select people of appropriate talent and standards, establishing effective training to ensure effective activity. The EOC believes that if we ensure appropriate selection, recruitment and training, the armed forces will get women who are capable of performing under pressure, and will, of course, also get men who are capable of performing under pressure.

The debate on equality and opportunity clearly turns on the requirement to select people who want to serve, who have the ability to do so and who, after training, prove that they are capable of doing so. When selection is approached in that way, women and men will serve alongside each other in the armed forces. My overwhelming hope is that many women will be given the right to command.

It saddens me to have to end on what I consider to be a note of some disdain. I was not in the House yesterday, as I explained, but I watched the monitor and I have read *Hansard*, and I am thoroughly unhappy about the comments of the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). Much of what he said was not explicit, and I suggest to the House that that is cheating. We should say to each other what we mean, and mean what we say to each other. In his comments, many of which were implicit, he made statements that I found thoroughly offensive. One comment—

Mr. Wilkinson: On a point of order. Is it normal for an hon. Member to make criticisms in that way? Perhaps the hon. Lady notified my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) that she was going to make critical remarks about him. He served in Her Majesty's armed forces for a long time, and his point of view was valid.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: First, I remind the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) that points of order should be addressed to the Chair.

I hope that the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) will assure the House that she was not accusing the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) of being a cheat, which would be unparliamentary use of language. I underline the point that was made by the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood: strong criticism of an hon. Member should be preceded by a notification that it will be made.

Ms Taylor: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I did not inform the hon. Member for Blaby of my intentions. I saw him in the House this morning but, sadly, assumed that he would be here this afternoon. I am sorry about that. I most certainly did not use the word "cheat" in the way you feared.

I point out, with sincerity and concern, that yesterday the hon. Gentleman said that few of us had any real experience of war. In opening his remarks, the hon. Gentleman referred to the second world war and said that he regarded that as the real war. I am seriously concerned about that, and I shall send him a note about it. What is his perception of the Gulf war, the Falklands or the Balkans, especially the situation in Bosnia and Croatia during the early 1990s? The men and women in those conflicts believed that they were fighting in real wars. In our communities, the families and friends of those who died in those conflicts believe that those people fought in real wars.

The hon. Gentleman referred to women in ways that I found unfortunate and insulting. His speech implied that to allow women on to the front line and into the infantry would lower standards, and that involving women in those ways would help to undermine the ability of the infantry and fundamentally alter its capabilities. I should like to know—indeed, the House deserves to know—the source of the evidence to which the hon. Gentleman referred. I know of no such evidence. The House has been a victim of prejudice that was personal and patronising.

Mr. Blunt: The hon. Lady is entitled to her point of view, but I share the opinion of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) about the involvement of women in the infantry and the fighting echelon which, in extremis, have to close with the enemy. I agree that it would be deleterious to the performance of the men if women served alongside them. We are entitled to our point of view. It is unfortunate that the hon. Lady should describe my hon. Friend's views as insulting to women. Both my hon. Friend and I are interested in the optimal

[Mr. Blunt]

performance of the armed services. I should be grateful if the hon. Lady would not suggest that we believe anything else.

Ms Taylor: I made no such statement. I would not for one minute imply that the hon. Member for Blaby does not have the optimal interests of the armed services at heart. However, it is important that we all understand the impact of what we say—in this case, that women are seen as an undermining force.

I am pleased that the Ministry of Defence is beginning to address issues of talent and opportunity by participating in the equality debate. I am absolutely convinced that in future people will be selected to command and serve on the basis of their talent and ability. Now that the equality debate has been opened, that should be the focus of tomorrow's armed forces. I hope that it will be and that the House will support women who want the opportunity to serve their country in 100 per cent. of the roles performed by our armed forces.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I want to share some simple arithmetic with the House. There are 63 minutes left for Back-Bench contributions and seven hon. Members seeking to catch my eye. I hope that hon. Members will use the time as equitably as possible.

5.27 pm

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I listened with great interest to the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor). Equality and ability are obviously important to her, but she should also recognise the importance of suitability. I was a gunner in the armed forces. Many gunners manned the anti-aircraft sites, or ack-ack sites, outside the main cities. Although I was never in such a unit, I suspect that few women would have found such a role suitable. If they were rejected for such a job, that should not be regarded as discrimination. That would be unfair to people who take a professional view of the suitability of people of different sizes and abilities to handle the awful job of fighting on the front line. That has to be taken into account. The hon. Lady does not seem to have grasped that issue.

I am aware that other hon. Members want to speak, but I want to cover a little of the old ground and clear up the matter of Europe. I am an Atlanticist. I have lived in America and know that it is vital to this country in terms of trade—and the way in which it came to our rescue in the first and second world wars and again during the cold war. It is important that we should all see the American influence as part of the democratic way in which we, as a democratic nation, serve the cause of peace.

There are those involved in European security and defence who wish America to keep away and gradually disappear from playing a role in the defence of Europe. I notice that as an active member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I have been a member of the Assembly for some 20 years, so I have seen it through the cold war. I have seen the initiatives that we have needed to take with the Russians both in the cold war and in peace. Some people may think that we can remove the American presence by creating a European security and defence identity. To do so would have the effect of decoupling us from the United States, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) said. New methods of command and control and a new bureaucracy would be established. My right hon. and learned Friend quoted some of the comments made by French politicians, such as the Prime Minister and other senior officials. Their ideas would lead to the exclusion of the United States. That would be folly.

We still have an uncertain world to deal with. Wilfully to exclude America on the ground that we do not want it to dominate us would be wrong. One phrase was quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) yesterday. The French European Affairs Minister said:

> We do not agree with the Americanisation of the world . . . We are saying that together we can build a new superpower . . . and its name will be Europe.—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2000; Vol. 355, c. 743.]

It is not only people like that who speak in such terms. Some of my French colleagues whom I very much admire would disown such a statement, but the French have always been an unwilling partner in NATO. More recently, they have been more active and have played a useful role, but they have long wished to play some role that would strengthen Europe and, so they think, make Europe more independent and get rid of the American influence.

There are those who, because they want Great Britain to play what they regard as a more constructive role in the European Union, go along with those views. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe said, the Prime Minister has altered not only the tone but the words of his language. I do not believe that he or we ever contemplated that we would be playing some grandiose role in creating a new organisation that would ultimately distance Europe from America for political reasons and make it a political power—a big new European state.

It is not good enough for Labour Members to regard my comments as an example of Europhobia. I believe more than some of my hon. Friends that we should play a constructive role in Europe, but to me Europe is an economic organisation, not a political organisation that deals with defence in such a way that it rules out the sorts of co-operation to which we have been used.

Europe can obviously play its part in bringing together the disparate parts of Europe. Some countries are members of the European Union, some are not, and some are not involved in any of the western European organisations. The EU can perhaps help to coalesce the interests of the countries of Europe. It can do something that it has not yet grasped. If it wants to preserve the peace and stability of Europe and play its part in the world, it must rise to that responsibility by providing the money to fulfil those obligations.

The United States may get rather tired, fed up and critical of some of the things that we are doing. I am bound to say that some European countries have a lot more work to do in terms of security and defence. That is why my right hon. and learned Friend was right to quote the new setting of the decision to discuss the various organisations that would cut across the existing arrangements that have worked so well. The establishment of permanent political and military structures as soon as

possible after the Nice European Council is on the agenda. If that goes too far, it will not only create another bureaucracy but widen the gap between ourselves and the United States.

I hope that we will not hear in the Minister's reply or in Labour Members' speeches that the sentiments that I express are Europhobic. They are not. They are designed to face the reality of some of those influences in Europe who believe that a federal state with a European army is the way to guarantee the peace of Europe. There are countries in Europe that do not want to touch heights of commitment that we in Britain have. They want a security umbrella, but not necessarily in the form of a federation. In some countries—our own is one such—it would not be believed that, in this day and age, it is right that military command should be put under the umbrella of a federal government.

Federation is not an unworthy objective. After the US war of independence, the Americans tried to establish a federation; they failed, because the various states wanted to run their own affairs. It took almost 100 years to develop a federal state. With the differences that exist—in language, in history and in our systems of democracy—why should we assume that the only true path to security is increasingly to develop institutions that gradually undermine the sovereignty of individual nations?

Obviously, we can try to develop trade, common laws and so on to work for our mutual benefit, but to put under federal control foreign policy and its handmaiden—defence policy—with the consequence that all decisions on sending service personnel to fight would cease to be taken by national Governments, is to live in cloud cuckoo land.

We should learn from the American experience. If we want to develop a federal society in which such decisions are taken by a federal government and not by individual states, perhaps we should wait 100 years—we would be the better for it.

5.36 pm

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Like many hon. Members, I follow my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence in paying tribute to the service and sacrifice of our armed forces in such theatres as the Balkans, Sierra Leone and Northern Ireland, where we have been fighting for peace and in defence of human rights and human life. I chose those three theatres because it is pleasing to see that there are better prospects for peace in them. I am sure that the whole House hopes that those prospects will flower.

I am sure, too, that all hon. Members will support the comments of the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), who paid tribute to the former prisoners of war of the Japanese. We welcome the Government's indication that, at long last, they will receive compensation.

In his speech yesterday, the shadow Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), concentrated on two issues that he suggested would split NATO: the European security and defence identity and what he called BMD—ballistic missile defence. The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) focused on the ESDI; I shall focus on BMD.

I was sorry to miss the speech made yesterday by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), because I had to chair a meeting. As ever, his contribution was impressive and comprehensive. He made eloquently many of the points that I wanted to raise, so I shall abbreviate some of my remarks by referring to his.

The whole House agrees that national missile defence, or BMD, will have a massive influence on Britain. Although that will apply whoever is elected as the US President, there will be differences according to which of the two main candidates is successful. As neither has spelt out a detailed policy on the matter, I deduced what such policies might be. I relied in particular on articles written by their supporters and advisers and on discussions held by an all-party group that visited Washington. We spoke to members of both main parties and to people who held a broad spectrum of views on defence. I made use of a seminar convened by the Heritage Foundation, at which the shadow Secretary of State spoke and which was attended by several Conservative Members.

The rationale for NMD is the perceived threat that rogue states could obtain weapons of mass destruction and the missile delivery systems for them. The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs report records that the consensus of the expert evidence that it received was that both the extent and the immediacy of that threat had been massively hyped in the United States. The Committee suggested that political and commercial interests had perhaps been more important than a strategic, objective assessment. One contribution to the Heritage Foundation seminar seemed to imply that, as it used phrases such as "protect our cities" and "protect our families", appealing to the American frontier spirit—to which the gun lobby also tends to appeal—suggesting that the other party would be "weak on defence", and asking why anyone should object to the system, as it was purely defensive. People who use that last argument are rather like the person who says, "If I go out wearing a flak jacket wherever I go, I am not really being aggressive", and does so while carrying a sub-machine gun. However, I digress.

To return to my main argument, the perception is that the threat from rogue states has been gravely exaggerated—that the United States should not underestimate the enormous deterrent effect of its vast nuclear and conventional forces. As the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife said, even the most unpredictable and ruthless tyrant can have a very strong sense of self-preservation. However, I repeat what I have said previously in this House—that I do not underestimate any of the threats that face us. I realise that there is always a possibility that weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems could fall into the hands of a maniac who was simultaneously genocidal and suicidal.

On the rogue states situation, it must be a source of relief to us all that the political and diplomatic situation has improved to the point where, as a result of the improvement in North Korea and other states, our US allies are talking about "states of concern". The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife enumerated that more fully.

The impression is that the Clinton presidency was perhaps largely pushed on NMD by the political factors that I mentioned earlier. It indicated that a decision on NMD would largely depend on objective criteria—such things as technical feasibility, the perceived threat, effects on arms control and diplomatic relations, and costs. One must assume that a Gore presidency would probably work on the same basis.

[Mr. Malcolm Savidge]

I hope that, when the new presidency sees the reduction in the threat by other means, it recognises that even limited national missile defence would have an effect on the anti-ballistic missile treaty, on the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and on arms control generally, and that it assesses the feasibility of such a defence—which ties in with cost, because so far we have had one dubious hit out of three—and reconsiders the whole idea of missile defence.

The failures of the tests so far are one of the reasons why supporters and advisers of Mr. Bush have given for going along with ballistic missile defence—by which they mean something more extensive than NMD—and I believe that that is why the shadow Secretary of State uses that particular phrase. This is a BMD that might be sea-launched, space-based and land-based, and could cover boost-phase, mid-phase and final-phase interception.

The first thing to recognise is that to develop such a system would be a total abrogation of the ABM treaty. Some of those who support such a course of action claim that that treaty no longer exists because the Soviet Union no longer exists. However, we are not talking about only one treaty. It should be remembered that when we reached the agreement, which Britain played a major part in achieving, at the end of the 2000 negotiations on the NNPT, part of what was agreed to by all states present was

> preserving and strengthening the ABM treaty as a cornerstone of strategic stability and as a basis for further reductions in offensive weapons

The Russians—or some Russians—have suggested that there could also be a connection between the ABM treaty and both the strategic arms limitation talks and the strategic arms reduction talks. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) said, there is a real risk that we could undermine the whole arms control regime.

In a similar vein, even limited nuclear missile defence could have the danger of encouraging Russia to update its nuclear weapons or China to expand its. That would hardly be surprising, because extreme advocates of BMD already argue that it should be used against China. As the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife pointed out, if missile defence were up and running, who is to say that that lobby would not become increasingly vociferous? The right hon. and learned Gentleman also pointed out that if China were to expand its nuclear weapons capability, there would be a grave danger of a knock-on effect on a series of other countries in south-east Asia.

Some extreme exponents of BMD discount Chinese concerns—and the most extreme of them even discount Russian concerns—on the basis that neither country can afford to rival the US if it decides to expand its arsenals. However, the economic destabilisation—or, in one case, the further economic destabilisation—of a major nuclear weapons state is extremely dangerous in itself and must also increase the dangers of the export of nuclear and/or missile technology at state or private criminal level.

Proponents of BMD talk about protecting US cities and families, but some of their rhetoric suggests that they would take a gung-ho adventurist approach to dealing with present or future nuclear weapons states in the confidence that the US had an impenetrable missile shield. Unless the technology were infallible, those US cities and families—and US allies—might find themselves in greater jeopardy.

I am particularly concerned at the suggestion of boost-phase interception—sea-based or otherwise. That has been proposed not just by the Republican right—the former Defence Secretary, Harold Brown, and others have proposed the same idea in *Foreign Affairs*. The technical feasibility of firing from a ship is questionable, but it is undoubtedly true that to try to intercept in the less than five minutes of the boost phase is easier because the target is larger, slower, hot and no decoys can be used.

However, missiles would be dispersed around the world and in close proximity to nuclear weapon states. The boost phases last less than five minutes, so within how many seconds of suspected detection of the launch of a missile would a decision have to be taken to fire and intercept a missile? At what level of the chain of command would the decision be taken and how many seconds would there be to take it? If an intercept missile were accidentally fired towards a nuclear weapons state and the act were misinterpreted, what would the consequences be? Are we really suggesting that our safety for future centuries could be within a few seconds of such an accident? The sword of Damocles would seem rather safe by comparison.

To try to reduce a comparatively remote threat that can be reduced by other means, our US allies are in danger of increasing far greater threats—regional nuclear war, nuclear terrorism and nuclear weapons fired by accident or through misunderstanding—with the horrific possibility of an uncontrolled situation resulting in a holocaust.

The shadow Secretary of State suggested that the Government should lead Europe in discussions with our US allies on this issue. I agree with his suggestion, but I fear that he means that we should lead Europe in trying to persuade everyone to accept unconditionally whatever the US decides. That is not a good way to be an ally. I hope that, whoever becomes American President, the United Kingdom Government will—not necessarily publicly or by megaphone diplomacy—follow the suggestion of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs that we articulate our strong concerns about missile defence and encourage the US to seek other ways of reducing the threats that it perceives to exist. I hope that we shall consider seriously the suggestion made by Ambassador Jayantha Dhanapala, the UN Under- Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, which is supported by Kofi Annan. We should think about taking an initiative to get an international conference of all countries, including those nuclear weapons states that do not involve themselves in the present treaty negotiations, on the issue of weapons of mass destruction. The issue is of such vital importance that we cannot afford to waste time.

5.50 pm

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): The fact that I was able to speak on defence procurement a week ago on 26 October, at column 454, reconciles me to the fact that my time now, if I am to give colleagues a chance to speak, is tight. That being so, I shall restrict myself to one point.

I take as my text the report of the Select Committee on Defence, entitled "Lessons of Kosovo". There is much to be learned, and the report is a mine of learning. In paragraph 66, the report makes the obvious point that

working in co-ordination with other allies has advantages in terms of politics and in terms of military advantage. The rest of the report points out the difficulties and disadvantages of working as an alliance.

I shall quote from paragraph 281, which deals with alliance unity. It reads:

> Unity was, in the end, the Alliance's greatest strength. At the same time it was NATO's weakest point. The perceived need to defend NATO's credibility was, in itself, a major factor in driving the process whereby the Alliance found itself painted into a corner by March 1999 from which its only way out was to pursue a military campaign against Serbia. Yet the maintenance of its unity was the factor which most significantly restricted the military options open to the Alliance to pursue an efficient and successful coercive strategy against Milosevic.

General Naumann, the former chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, put it well when he said that

> we did not have the consensus in the Alliance when we started to threaten the use of force . . . that is my lesson learned for crisis management. I am saying this openly and frankly, since I am certain the next crisis will come.

The lesson of Kosovo is that NATO is not the sum of its parts. It is far less than that. An operation such as Kosovo is full of false starts, blind alleys, contradictory actions, internal politics and sectarian passions. One lesson of Kosovo is that joint operations are infinitely complicated and that we in the United Kingdom need to be on our guard.

The second lesson of Kosovo is that we must maintain the Atlantic alliance. In Iraq, Kuwait, Bosnia and Kosovo, the situation was rescued by the United States. It was only when the United States became involved that those issues were resolved.

The third lesson is that Europe must strengthen its defence contributions for its own sake and for the sake of NATO. There are too many nations taking a cheap or a free ride. I shall refer to a document produced by the general rapporteur of the Economics and Security Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Mr. Paul Helminger. He points out that the United States contributes about $290 billion a year to defence whereas all the European countries together contribute only $180 billion.

Some nations—notably Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg—are very weak in their defence contributions. They are weak also in the sense that much of the money that they put in goes into conscripted forces rather than equipment. That is why the figures that I quoted last week—those of the European allies contributing only 60 per cent. of the resources of the United States but receiving 15 per cent. of the effect—are so important.

We must do more. We must do more in the House to draw attention to these items. I am happy to be a delegate to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Two of my colleagues there, who are both in the Chamber—my right hon. Friends the Members for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) and for East Devon (Sir P. Emery)—make important contributions to the assembly. It is an assembly of the 19 NATO countries, with 17 associate countries. We work in five committees. I believe that the assembly is able to make a major contribution in the understanding of the problems and the ways in which NATO can co-operate more as we move forward.

There is much more that I could say, but in the interests of brevity and to allow my colleagues to contribute to the debate, I conclude on that point.

5.54 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Sixty years ago, the battle of Britain was coming to its conclusion. I am not sure that the country quite realised that we had won, but my constituents in Ruislip-Northwood are most appreciative of the commemoration that took place during the autumn of this year.

For us, that was particularly important as Royal Air Force Northolt was in the front line in the battle. It commemorated its 85th anniversary this year, and 600 Squadron the Royal Auxiliary Air Force—that is, the City of London Squadron—was a battle of Britain squadron and celebrated its 75th anniversary.

For the 60th anniversary of the battle, we had the moving ceremony of the freedom of entry to the borough of Hillingdon commemorated by a march of personnel from RAF Northolt into Ruislip. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) wants to be associated with these remarks, inasmuch as headquarters of No. 11 group of Fighter Command was at RAF Uxbridge and played a crucial part in the battle.

The hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) said that the risk to Europe of a great power invasion such as that posed by Hitler 60 years ago and by the Soviet Union during the period of the cold war had come to an end, and that we must adapt our institutions to meet the new challenges and the new realities in a highly unpredictable continent.

The hon. Gentleman also referred, as did many hon. Members during the debate, to the importance of parliamentary scrutiny of our joint activities as parliamentarians to ensure that our alliance as a whole makes a good and effective effort, and he said that the European security and defence initiative should have a parliamentary dimension.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the work of the assembly of the Western European Union, on which I serve. I take this opportunity to say how valuable that institution has proved, not only through the cold war, but in adapting to those new realities. In particular, it has expanded its membership in a highly commendable way, so that we now have no fewer than 28 member countries, with various gradations of membership beyond those of the 10 full members.

Now that the WEU is to be amalgamated within the European Union, the institution is coming under close and careful scrutiny. We in the assembly have had various reports, not least from Mr. Richard, the French Defence Minister. The French view, which is important because the French, like us, are a nuclear power and a key element of the defence of our continent, seems to be that article 5 of the Brussels treaty, which is a mutual security guarantee, should remain within the WEU, and so should the role of armaments co-operation.

That is a field in which we have great experience, as does the North Atlantic Assembly. With so many joint projects under way and planned, everyone understands the necessity of national parliamentarians putting pressure on their national Governments to vote the requisite budgets and to make sure that those joint programmes work and are forthcoming on budget, to time and to specification. That makes sense. I do not regret that the security institute in Paris should go to the European Union, or that the satellite reconnaissance and processing centre at Torrejon should also go to the EU.

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

However, I urge the Government to realise the significance of the assembly. It is important because it provides a bridge between those members of the alliance that are members of the EU, those that are members of NATO or members of both, and the other European partners of various kinds. Just a few days ago, we had a visit from parliamentarians of the Russian Duma—something that happens frequently in the North Atlantic Assembly, where there is a good dialogue with them as well.

We had a fascinating exchange of views about ballistic missile defence, to which the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) made a learned contribution, and on the Russian parliamentarians' attitude to Europe's acquiring a strategic identity of its own, with its own common defence policy and, in a sense, its own armed forces under its own control.

In an important speech in Warsaw, the Prime Minister suggested that the European Union could become a super-power. That was an unfortunate use of language. Europe has no more need of super-powers; what it needs is a community of interests among like-minded democratic states working together for their common good and mutual security. If the EU's acquisition of its own defence identity gave it the characteristics of a super-power, that would be a thoroughly retrograde development.

The Prime Minister also suggested that the European Parliament could have a second chamber consisting of national parliamentarians. The European Parliament is an institution that fulfils a function of its own in its own particular way, but it should not have a defence function. That is clear to me, for the reasons that I adduced earlier: for as long as national Governments are responsible for the composition of their armed forces and for procurement decisions, and for as long as national parliamentarians vote the requisite funds and are answerable to their electorates in ensuring that their military forces remain under democratic control, the European Parliament—which in any case has not the full treaty competence to assume a defence responsibility—should assume no such responsibility.

If the European Parliament assumed that responsibility, its action would accentuate the divide to which I referred earlier between those within the European Union and those who share similar aspirations for mutual security, and who for a long time to come will be outside the EU. In other words, it would be a thoroughly divisive development. I urge the Government to bear my comments in mind, and ask the Minister to reach a conclusion and give the Government's view.

Let me return to my original point. As one who spent his formative years in the Royal Air Force, I immensely appreciated Her Majesty's Government's commemoration of the battle of Britain in such a fitting way. As the Minister will remember, I asked him a question at the end of July, in response to which he gave me a list of events. We were proud that so many of those events took place at Royal Air Force Northolt and at Ruislip, in my constituency.

6.2 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I thank my hon. Friends for their forbearance in allowing me to catch your eye towards the end of the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I hope that the Minister will bear in mind what has been said about European defence, notably by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith)—the shadow Secretary of State—my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith), my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson). They expressed seriously held concerns about the development of the future alliance between the United States and Europe.

We have now entered a dangerous phase in the development of defence in Europe. I believe that the Prime Minister has made a fundamental mistake, and I hope that the Government will heed the warnings that senior Members have given—warnings that are echoed in the United States. The Government should bear in mind the fact that in view of the institutions that are currently being created, there is—we hope—still time to protect the current position, and to sustain defence within NATO. If the pass continues to be sold, as it began to be at St. Malo, we shall rue the day.

In debates such as this, it is possible to deal with a number of issues. Because of my professional background in defence, I find many of those issues enormously fascinating. I was particularly interested by what the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) said about the role of women in the armed forces. She is right: that will be an important subject of debate, certainly over the next year, as the Secretary of State has instructed the armed services to look at women's role in the fighting echelons.

The hon. Member for Stockton, South and I hold profoundly different views on that subject. I hope that the Secretary of State will simply take the advice that I expect him to receive from the armed forces, and that there will be no further progress in that respect. However, I hope that if we debate the matter in the House, the hon. Lady will show proper respect for our views, especially the views of those of us who have experience in the fighting echelon. I refer not least to my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), who was in the Special Air Service and the infantry, and saw active service in Northern Ireland and in the Gulf. He speaks with recent authority on those matters.

One of the reasons why our armed forces are special may be our traditions and the way in which our regiments have been equipped, served and staffed. There are important questions about our future military effectiveness. Ultimately, the crux of the matter is not equal opportunities but military effectiveness. It is fine if an equal opportunities agenda can support that, but if not, serious choices must be made. I shall always choose the future military effectiveness of the armed forces, given that the primary duty of any Government is security.

Yesterday's debate began with an inelegant spat about the evidence that Air Marshal Sir John Day had given to the Select Committee on Defence earlier in the day, and about whether he had been volunteered, or told, to author or put his name to an article that appeared in a Sunday newspaper and rebutted the opinions of the Select Committee's excellent report on Kosovo.

The Minister for the Armed Forces referred to my intervention, and said that my behaviour at the beginning of the Kosovo crisis, when I called for the resignation of the Chief of the Defence Staff, had been despicable. I shall return to that matter shortly. He said:

> Frankly, he will never be taken seriously on defence in this House until he apologises for that despicable behaviour.—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2000; Vol. 355, c. 807.]

The comment about being taken seriously is absurd. One should be taken seriously if one has informed views that are expressed honestly and with integrity. I believe that I did that.

Who actually behaves despicably? I want to focus on the use of the military to support politicians and political policy. The Government have a record of doing that. In yesterday's debate, the Secretary of State was properly incensed by the suggestion that he had instructed Air Marshal Day to write the article. I am glad about that, because it showed a sensitivity to the issue of using the military to put forward Government policy positions. The Secretary of State has not been associated with the worst aspects of that practice, which occurred during the conduct of the Kosovo crisis. However, it is part of a wider pattern of behaviour by the Government.

That behaviour began with the appointment of Alastair Campbell as the Prime Minister's press secretary, with an Order in Council to enable him and Jonathan Powell to give instructions to civil servants. They were therefore special special advisers, and a new status was created. In the Administration's early days, several heads of Government information departments were dismissed or removed, not least Gill Samuel, who was press secretary at the Ministry of Defence. I had the pleasure of working with her when Sir Malcolm Rifkind was Secretary of State for Defence and I was his special adviser.

Most disgraceful of all has perhaps been the appointment of John Williams as head of the news department at the Foreign Office. Anyone who read the bilge that John Williams produced as political editor of *The Mirror* knows that he should not head the news department of the Foreign Office, a post that requires a proper neutral presentation of Government policy rather than a presentation of Labour policy. It has been reported that the appointment was made in the teeth of opposition by Sir John Kerr, permanent secretary to the Foreign Office. That is highly regrettable. The Minister must understand that the Government have a record, and I hope that he will pay careful attention and give careful consideration where the military are involved.

We discussed the article by Sir John Day yesterday. I shall not say anything more about that, but instead draw the Minister's attention to another occasion during the Kosovo crisis when General John Drewienkiewicz, who headed the British contribution to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe monitors in Kosovo, had got out of Kosovo and was trying to establish his mission in Macedonia. He had an enormously difficult task to do when he was summoned back to London to appear on a press platform with the Foreign Secretary and support his views on what had been happening in Kosovo.

If it was merely information that was required of General Drewienkiewicz, that could have been delivered by a number of methods from the field in which he was operating. Instead, operational priorities were subordinated to the Government's need to present their policy and have a uniformed figure who was able to speak with the authority of his military experience, his uniform and his rank in support of the Government.

There are occasions when that is the right thing to do, because uniform and experience in the services gives spokesmen authority and credibility. The Army and other services have experienced that for some time. However, the authority with which people speak is not necessarily related to rank. The most effective advocates of what the military are about and the missions in which they are involved are sometimes junior non-commissioned officers. Hon. Members may remember the graphic account by a corporal and a sergeant who took part in the recent raid on Sierra Leone. They may also remember the lance-corporal from the battalion who appeared on television explaining what the training team were doing with the Sierra Leone army. Those soldiers made very effective advocates of what the military were about. Indeed, it was standard practice in Northern Ireland to use section commanders to explain what was happening, because they spoke with simple authority about the tasks that they had done.

I now turn to the demand from the Minister for the Armed Forces that I should apologise for asking General Sir Charles Guthrie to resign. The one area in which I feel that the Defence Committee report is lacking relates to the military advice that was given to our politicians at the outset of the Kosovo crisis and during the run-up to it. I was on the Defence Committee when we set up the terms of reference for the inquiry, and I made sure that that was included. I am sorry that it did not result in any paragraphs in the report—perhaps for the perfectly understandable reason that the Government were not prepared to disclose any of the military advice that they received.

One reason—perhaps the main reason—why I found myself asking the then Chief of Defence Staff to consider his position was the fact that every military commentator and every independent defence commentator outside the Government was saying that the conduct of the Kosovo operation was misconceived if it was an attempt solely on the basis of air power to bend President Milosevic and the Serbian Government to the will of NATO. Everyone was saying that what was required was the prospect of a ground invasion to follow up the use of air power. Indeed, when we reached the end of the crisis, the evidence that the Select Committee took revealed that we were within weeks, if not days, of mobilising the armed forces and the Territorial Army for that ground invasion in order to carry out our military objectives.

In response to an oral question from me in the House, Lord Robertson, who was then Secretary of State, said that the military advice that the Chief of the Defence Staff was giving contradicted the military assessment being made by everyone else outside the Ministry of Defence. We shall not know whether that was the case for 30 years, because that is when the papers will be released.

However, I put on record the fact that I do not believe that the Chief of the Defence Staff was at variance with every other military commentator. The issue turned on the fact that the Chief of the Defence Staff and all the other military chiefs in Europe and NATO had to plan within the political constraints put on them in 1998, which ruled out the use of ground forces. Attention is drawn to that in the Select Committee report. Of particular concern to me at the time was the fact that the Chief of the Defence Staff

[Mr. Crispin Blunt]

was used, or chose to allow himself to be used, to promote the Government's policy, which was controversial both in this House and outside. That was ill advised and, indeed, wrong.

The Chief of the Defence Staff allowed his name to appear over an article in *The Sun* which said:

> Slobodan Milosevic has been wiping out the population of Kosovo. His secret police, special forces and paramilitary thugs murder anyone in their way.

I have to say that from my time working alongside General Guthrie as a special adviser in the Ministry of Defence, I do not recognise him from the choice of language in that article. I like Sir Charles Guthrie as a man, which is why it was difficult for me to do what I did, and why I approached the issue seriously.

In articles in *The Sunday Times* and the *Evening Standard*, General Guthrie put forward the policy position of his political masters. In a phrase redolent of the Prime Minister, he said:

> To govern is to choose and Nato's political leaders chose the third option with the aim of curbing Milosevic's ability to bully and murder the innocent people of Kosovo by hitting the key points of his command chain and curbing his forces on the ground.

General Guthrie went on to say:

> Does our chosen course contain risks? Yes, but after months of analysis we have concluded that these risks are less than those presented by the other roads we could have chosen.

It is wrong that the Chief of the Defence Staff put himself forward to explain and defend Ministers' highly controversial policy.

Like me, defence commentators with a military background were most concerned about the potential politicisation of the armed forces. Francis Ponsonby, who covers defence issues in the House better than anyone else, and is a retired naval officer, said:

> Mr Blunt was, however, right to draw attention to the astonishing defence of Government strategy which CDS allowed to be published over his signature in a national newspaper. Permanent Secretaries of Departments of State, to which CDS is equivalent, do not write to newspapers except, rarely, to correct glaringly inaccurate reports affecting their departments: public presentation of current policies and strategy is the province of Ministers which members of the present Government from the Prime Minister downwards have not been reluctant to employ. It is surprising that General Guthrie allowed himself to be used as he was, and Mr Blunt was undoubtedly right to draw attention to it, even though he seems to have made few friends by doing so.

To be fair to Francis Ponsonby, he questions whether I was wise to ask for the resignation of Sir Charles Guthrie. When my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) congratulated me on my political courage, I realised that perhaps I had gone a step too far regarding my personal position, and had been a little too courageous.

Following the comments of the Minister for the Armed Forces, I reviewed the matter last night and this morning, and asked myself whether I was right to do what I did. Like those who were Ministers at the time—and, no doubt, Sir Charles himself—the Minister for the Armed Forces saw my action as a stab in the back at a difficult time. That is a perfectly proper point of view, and when I said what I did, I realised that it might be seen in that way. However, I was speaking solely for myself, not for my party. Indeed, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe was going to go on the record and make that clear to the House.

I was speaking for the constituency which I served, and into which I was born as the son and grandson of serving officers. It was the serving and retired military who felt disquiet at the way in which the Chief of the Defence Staff allowed himself to be used to present what were properly policy issues. He should not have been put in that position. I still believe that as an informed Back Bencher, I was entitled, and right, to come to the conclusion that I did.

I note that after my letter was published in *The Times*, the Chief of the Defence Staff desisted from publishing further articles during the Kosovo conflict. I think that that was to do with the disquiet that I had expressed. I would like to place on record the fact that since then, I have had no cause to query the performance of the Chief of the Defence Staff. In the past 18 months he has been particularly effective. Perhaps what he should be most proud of is the political action that he had to carry out privately: rescuing the defence budget before the last comprehensive spending review. He did the job that Ministers and the Secretary of State failed to do to get increased resources for defence.

The one conclusion that I hope Ministers will bear in mind is that they should take the greatest care about using serving service men to promote what is properly a matter of policy. It causes great disquiet to those of us with a service background. The armed services should not be politicised, and special care should be taken that they are not.

6.21 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): This has been a remarkable two-day debate. I suspect that, at the end of the debate this time last week, we had no idea—certainly none of us on the Conservative Benches had any idea—that we were facing another two days of debate. When we all heard that we were having another two, there was not only a mixture of elation and delight that at last we were going to have our head, but a few inner groans about how we were going to fill the time and what the quality of the debate was going to be. All I can say is that, after more than 17 years in the House, my view that this has undoubtedly been one of the best two-day debates that we have had. The quality of individual contributions on both sides of the House has been very high.

I recall my visit to the Italian parliamentary defence committee. I think that I am right in saying that there are some 60 members of it, 14 of whom have ever been known to turn up to a meeting, and the meetings are usually extremely brief. That is about it in the Parliament of one of our major allies. Therefore, we should take seriously the Defence Committee's role in meeting parliamentarians from other defence committees.

Having said that, I must start on a light note and I will end on a serious one. The light note is to record that the MOD websites have still not been updated. I shall check regularly to see if the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy (Dr. Moonie), is still a recently arrived addition to the team.

Also on a light note, having listened for two days to some of the delusions of Labour Members about what the Conservative party does and does not believe, and why

the Prime Minister has completely changed his mind on our relationship with the European Union, I am drawn to Lord Robertson's 12 rules of opposition. I found one that I thought explained what might be in the minds of some Members. Item 3 says:

> Don't pretend you are the government. This delusion, beloved of opposition politicians being self-important (and I confess to the affliction at times) is time consuming and unproductive and a real waste of energy. One of the few minor benefits of opposition is that occasionally you do not have to agonise like the government on tough decisions and can enjoy not being in the hot seat.

He then says something revealing:

> I recall in the early 80s a colleague of mine coming from a Shadow Cabinet meeting shaking his head, "Usually we spend hours discussing matters as if we were the government. Tonight", he went on, "it was much worse, they were pretending to be the American government."

Before I turn to the debate itself, may I say how much I shall miss the cheery countenance opposite of the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (Mrs. Heal)? I congratulate her on her appointment as First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means. She has taken a serious part in our defence debates for some years. Although we shall miss her contributions, we shall look forward very much to seeing her in the Chair.

The only point that I should like to pick up in what the Minister for the Armed Forces said is his remark about cadets. I welcome almost everything else; I am very pleased that some of the ideas that I raised two years ago and more have been taken on board. Yesterday, we heard a remarkable and informed speech by the hon. Member for Tamworth (Mr. Jenkins). I have not informed him of my intention to refer to him because I am going to compliment him. I spoke to him today, and he told me how worried he was about the cadets. He said that there are still schools in his constituency that will not allow the cadets—let alone Army recruiting teams—anywhere near them. I know not whether that is the case; I simply report it. If it is true that some education authorities or schools will still not let either Army recruiting teams or cadet forces near them, I hope that Ministers will take the matter very seriously.

Mr. Spellar: I have done more than that: I have asked the Department to notify me of any such case so that I can take it up with the relevant Member of Parliament or education authority. I am more than delighted to take this opportunity of extending that invitation to hon. Members. I am more than happy to take up such cases.

Mr. Key: I thank the Minister very much indeed for that generous offer, which I hope will be taken up.

The hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) made a remarkable and well-informed speech, as one would expect. However, it should be read alongside the speech of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), whose remarks would act as a foil to some of the hon. Gentleman's more extraordinary views.

As usual, the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) made an informed, helpful and constructive speech. I wholly concur with many of his ideas.

I can only thank the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) for his good humour under fire from the Opposition, which is typical of him. *[Interruption.]* Here he comes, just in time to hear the tribute that I am paying him for his good humour and serious contribution to defence matters in the House.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe made a remarkable speech, which stands alone; it does not need my endorsement or praise. His was a landmark speech, which I hope will be widely quoted in the weeks, months and years to come.

The hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) made a passionate speech. She always makes passionate speeches, which is a very good thing indeed. However, I draw her attention to two issues that arise from what she said. She cited with approbation what has happened in the United States of America, but she is mistaken. She will find that the US military is suffering terrible crises of ethos precisely because of the policies that she recommends us to adopt here. She mentioned Israel, which is often cited as a state where women fight in the front line and as the state of equality for women in the services. I fear that nothing could be further from the truth. Israel tried that policy, but it did not work for many reasons which are well documented—and easy to pull off the web. It simply has not worked there and, in 1995, Israeli supreme court judgments changed the situation somewhat. Moreover, there is another factor—public opinion—with which I shall deal later. Nevertheless, the hon. Lady made a courageous speech.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith), who is a supreme Atlanticist, made a very fine speech indeed. I hope that it will be widely read for its sheer common sense and the long view that he takes, based on many years of experience.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) made a very serious contribution, as usual, to the debate—in this case, on ballistic missile defence. He is right that we need to hear more about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) was so right to speak of the certainty of the next crisis, and about what our reaction to it should be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) quite rightly stressed the parliamentary dimension to whatever replaces the current system. His decision to stress that dimension is born of long experience in the House and, indeed, in Europe. I congratulate him on that decision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) made a speech which I am quite sure will be remembered for its courtesy and the very great personal conviction with which he expressed his views.

This debate really needs to be about reassuring members of the armed forces and their families that we understand what their life is all about. We have heard many speeches in which we—Ministers, Labour Members and Opposition Members—have lectured the armed forces on defence, but it is time that we did a lot more listening. I suspect that the Government and the Opposition are at one on the need to do precisely that.

The challenge that we face is one of internal communication within the forces—the military machine—the Ministry of Defence, and the House of Commons itself. Internal communication must be led by organisations such as—to give but two examples—the Army Families Federation, and its equivalents in the RAF and the Navy, and HIVES—Help, Information and

[Mr. Key]

Volunteer Exchanges. Tri-service wide, there are more than 80 such remarkable organisations, providing an enormously and increasingly important resource for Army, Navy and RAF families.

The importance of those organisations is recognised in, for example, "Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy"—which is a hugely important document, with an incredibly boring title that is enough to put anyone off. However, the document recognises the new world into which the armed forces have moved, having experienced not only a contraction in numbers but a completely new world of relationships that are perhaps best characterised as inclusive.

It is also hugely encouraging, I am convinced, that the Adjutant-General clearly understands what is going on and what needs to be done to achieve the internal communication objectives. However, I am not so sure that the Treasury understands what needs to be done. The question that the Opposition must ask is, what is the Government's real commitment to people in our military community? Given that the Government—and certainly Defence Ministers—understand what is needed, will we see a financial commitment to that internal communication, which will be the mortar that binds together the military's family and personnel strategies?

It is, as ever, all about priorities. The first priority has to be operations. Operations are what the British military is very good at, and operations are what the British military enjoys doing. However, perhaps operations have had too much of a priority over personnel. Now, people must come a very close second to operations in the priorities of the Ministry of Defence, and politicians must start listening and learning very much more carefully than they have in the past.

There is just one document that people should be encouraged to read—the "Future Army Concept Paper", which says it all and is a mine of information for questing politicians. Instead of indulging our own fantasies, perhaps we should spend a little more time understanding the military point of view—which is all in this document. The "Future Army Concept Paper" is updated every few years, and a very great deal stems from it.

The first thing to recognise in the document is its identification and flagging up of the first-order issues, the first of which is the nature of conflict. The paper states:

> The fundamental character of conflict will continue to present an enduring physical and moral challenge for the soldier: a combination of extreme danger, rapidly changing circumstances in conditions of chaos and uncertainty, and severe physical demands. The capability and mental outlook to conduct aggressive close combat operations and to overcome the friction inherent in war will remain essential.

The paper goes on, very helpfully, to talk about asymmetry—which is the increasing probability of conflict that is not quite the conflict that we are used to. What we need to understand as politicians is that the military have to get inside the minds of their enemies. Perhaps Governments and Oppositions do that, too, but it is a bit different when it is a matter of life and death.

The asymmetric process explained in the document embraces the

> perceived weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the military, such as multi-national fault lines, the sensitivity of public opinion to casualties, cultural constraints (eg the use of women or children), legitimacy, and the rules of engagement.

The document says that those

> could apply throughout the battlespace from the front line to the home base.

We need to understand that more clearly, then we would begin to understand why there is resistance in the forces to having women in the front line. The question of the future soldier is also of a high order of priority. The military paper says:

> Account will need to be taken of future legislation, financial and other expectations, and the social environment (eg family unit, work patterns, urbanisation). The collective impact of these "people" trends on Future Army Capability is a key area for further work.

I should say so! That is absolutely crucial to the whole future of our armed forces personnel strategy.

The Armed Forces Discipline Act 2000 has been extremely controversial. We were originally told by the Lord Chancellor that it would not impact on the military, but that was gradually eroded in Committee and the Government rowed back and said that, yes, we would have to change the system and add appeal courts, and we ended up with something that will be extremely difficult for the military to operate; but the military will recognise that and do what they are told to do by the Government of the day. That is clear, and it can be very dangerous.

On enabling capabilities, the document calls for a more flexible approach to the use of the reserves. That is absolutely right. It calls for

> a more productive approach to the integration of full-time and part-time components.

We know all about that.

The paper also includes a section on nuclear, biological and chemical warfare and speaks of the need for an integrated approach, with a

> defence and decontamination capability in theatre . . . and at home.

I have always thought that the strategic defence review neglected that. It assumed that there was no point in a home guard. Defence of the homeland did not appear once in the review document, as far as I recall. The Army recognises the need for ballistic missile defence. The paper says:

> The Future Army must monitor closely defence thinking in this complex area—including any impact for Future Capabilities.

The annexe to the paper sets out the Chief of the General Staff's vision for the Army in the 21st century. It was published only last month. Its final bullet point says:

> We will develop, educate and reward our officers and soldiers so they have a true sense of their worth. They and their families must be provided with the care and support needed at home, in barracks and on operations as well as resettlement into civilian life. Careers and advancement will be based on equal opportunities and merit, but will also reflect the way we fight and organise.

The Government must set the political constraints. They are responsible for the personnel policy of the armed forces and for finding the money to pay them and buy the equipment. The Government are responsible for our role in the international world of defence. In the end, everything is down to the military—to the men and women of Her Majesty's forces—as well as to their families, to the scientific, industrial and administrative civil servants, to the private sector contractors who support them and to the vast work force in the defence industries of this country.

The greatest challenges facing the military are the human challenges imposed on them by the Government of the day, such as women in the front line and other

human relations issues. Our firm conviction is that those decisions must be taken by the chiefs of staff and the military themselves. What matters is military capability, not what we think is politically correct. That is the message that the Conservative party must send out tonight.

6.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I shall preface my remarks with a short statement, which I have agreed with the spokesmen from the two main Opposition parties, about something that happened earlier today.

In the early hours of this morning, a fire occurred in the engine room of HMS Fearless, which is currently in the Mediterranean. As a result of tremendous work by the crew, to whom I pay tribute, the fire was put out rapidly. There were 11 minor casualties, all of whom have fully recovered and are again available for duty.

The full extent of the damage and the cause of the fire are being investigated. We have decided to withdraw HMS Fearless from the amphibious taskforce deployment announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on Monday. That deployment will still go ahead, however, with the Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessel Argus and her embarked helicopters joining the group to support HMS Ocean. The fact that we have been able to integrate Argus at such short notice demonstrates the flexibility of our maritime forces, and our rapid reaction capability.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister for his flexibility in coming to the House to make that semi-statement. Will he, on behalf of Opposition Members, represent to members of the crew our hope that all has gone well and that our thoughts are with them in these difficult times? However, will he assure the House that that ship will not be out of service for too long? Has he any idea of the extent of the damage to the vessel and of how long it will be out of service? Will he be able to let the House know those details as soon as possible?

Dr. Moonie: I shall certainly pass the hon. Gentleman's remarks on to the crew. As to the extent of the damage, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the ship is sailing under its own power to Malta, where attempts at repair will be made and the extent of the damage inspected. At present, we are uncertain about how extensive the damage is, and about how long the ship will be out of service. However, I can assure the House that it will be brought back into service as soon as possible.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: May I associate myself and my party with the expressions of sympathy uttered by the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith)? Will the Minister say whether the effect of replacing HMS Fearless with RFA Argus and its complement of helicopters will be to strengthen the taskforce rather than weaken it?

Dr. Moonie: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right: the presence of the Argus and its three Sea King helicopters will provide the taskforce with an enhanced capability.

Before I reply to the debate, I should tell the House that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regrets that he cannot be present this evening, as a pressing engagement has meant that he cannot stay to the end of the debate.

It is a privilege for me to draw this defence debate to a close after two excellent days. However, a truly adequate reply would require that the debate be held over three days. I therefore regret that many hon. Members may be disappointed with the brevity of my remarks, and I hope that those to whom I do not manage to refer will recognise that time is limited.

Over the past two days, we have heard how the Government are investing in defence to make sure that our forces remain the best in the world. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State began by announcing another important decision about equipment that has been widely welcomed by hon. Members of all parties. The announcement of the engine choice for the type 45 destroyer is good news for Rolls-Royce, for jobs and for this country.

In replying to a debate such as this, one has to recognise certain priorities. I was intending to reply only to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), but my remarks are so extensive that I think that I shall post them to him—without a stamp.

A couple of minor housekeeping announcements give me some satisfaction. First, with the agreement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and of my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, I shall henceforward be taking over responsibility for cadets and reserve forces. I hope that I will be able to maintain the focus that has been placed on them and to give them the attention that they deserve. Many references have been made to them today, and I am looking forward to the challenge of trying to reverse some of the problems that we have had. I want to ensure that they are given the respect, and the status in society, that they deserve.

I have already made my next announcement in the press because it was being made public from another source, so I shall deal with it briefly. After great difficulty, my staff have managed to source some of our lamb from this country. It amounts to some 20 per cent. of our total requirement—not as much as we would all have liked, but it is a good start. I certainly hope that we can do further work on that in future.

There were one or two points made in yesterday's debate that I will try to sweep up, because my hon. Friend the Minister promised that I would. First, the use of ID tags is an important point which, as the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) rightly said, has been in our domain for quite some time. It is currently receiving active consideration. Our aim is to address the entire information needs of the defence medical services. We were hoping to initiate procurement through a private finance initiative project but, as sometimes happens, the final bidder withdrew earlier this year and the procurement is now to take place under the smart procurement initiative. An integrated project team is about to be appointed to take the project forward, although it is not at this stage possible to say when it might be placed. However, it is active.

We recognise the importance of accurate medical information on our troops, particularly in the theatre. We are in fact using the theatre of operational medical data system, which can be downloaded on to laptop computers and used in the field. It has proved very useful in ensuring that we maintain accurate permanent records for our staff, particularly in view of some of the illnesses and the comments that have been made about them over the past couple of days. I hope that I will have time to return to that in the course of my reply.

GREAT BRITAIN HOUSE OF COMMONS
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES (HANSARD)
1999/2000

Published on microfiche by Chadwyck-Healey (a Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company)
The Quorum, Barnwell Road
Cambridge CB5 8SW
England

Distributed in the USA by Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Rd
PO Box 1346
Ann Arbor
MI 48106 1346, USA

Date of publication: 2000/2001

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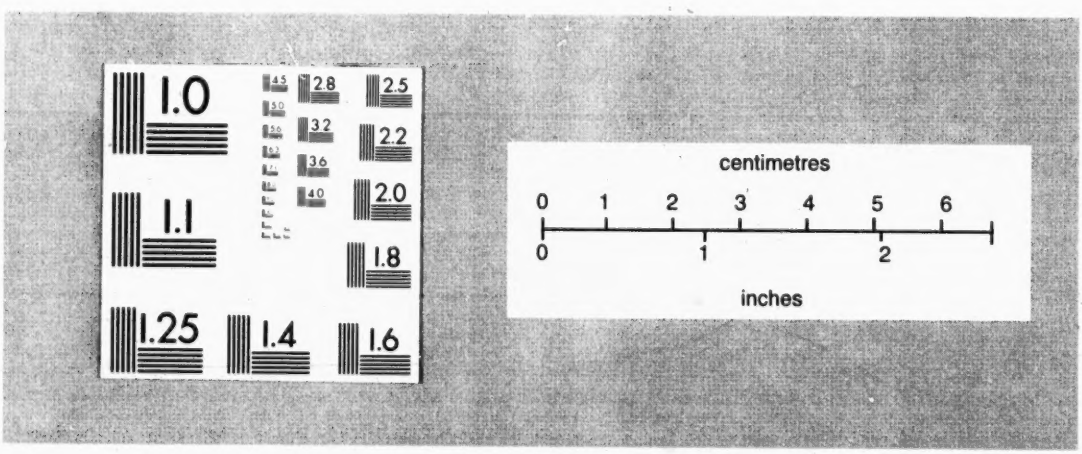
Technical data: Film type: positive silver halide, archivally permanent microfiche conforming to AIIM and BSI standards.

Producing laboratory: Bell & Howell



[Dr. Moonie]

Let me make some remarks about our proposals for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I am not simply replying to the points raised in the debate in chronological order, but right hon. and hon. Members will recognise that I must give them some sort of priority. I will respond to as many as I can.

I have spoken in an Adjournment debate on the subject of DERA, which has been raised on numerous occasions over the past year, and we have also announced to the House our intention to proceed with the implementation of the core confidence model for the DERA public-private partnership. This is our chosen solution. Under the core confidence model, two new organisations will be created, with 75 per cent. turned into a private sector company—new DERA—to be floated on the stock market once its potential is suitably developed, which has not yet taken place.

We will retain just under 3,000 staff in the Ministry of Defence, in what is now known as RDERA—or retained DERA—to carry out research in key areas to provide a high-level overview of defence science and technology; in-house impartial advice and management of international research collaboration. That is a different role that is in no way a second-best option for those who are retained in the public sector—quite the reverse. Both organisations will be viable and sustainable, adequately resourced to carry out the tasks expected of them.

We have always emphasised that new DERA, although a key supplier to the Ministry of Defence, will operate and be treated as a fully private sector company. Although a very important supplier, it will have no special or privileged relationship with the MOD. There will be a level playing field with industry which, frankly, I think is essential.

We are committed to ensuring that new DERA does not have an unfair commercial advantage and that all bidders for our future work are treated fairly and equitably. It is very much in the long-term interests of the MOD to encourage genuine competition, not only to maximise value for money but to open up our research programmes to new ideas from outside the Government. We are conducting a small pilot exercise to help us understand the issues associated with running competitions in a complex area that is difficult to define. Although there will always be some areas of work in which competition is not practicable, our goal is to ensure that as much as possible of the research programme is competed for.

I will not say any more about that—I think that I have given as brief but as full an explanation of the position as possible. I cannot say when our proposals will come to fruition; we have not yet decided on the exact mechanism to enable that to happen. When we do, I assure right hon. and hon. Members that they will be the first to know.

Mr. Duncan Smith: We remain in the dark. The joint strike fighter is a critical component of our defence strategy over the next 10 years, and issues such as those surrounding Boscombe down and the transfer of information lie at the heart of policy; yet we do not know where matters stand. Can the Minister not inform us much sooner of what is happening so that industry may know exactly what is going on and where things will fit in the structure?

Dr. Moonie: I accept that there is frustration among Conservative Members, but hope that they will accept that the issues are complex. We are well aware of decisions that must be taken in other programmes on which this matter has a bearing. As soon as we are aware of all the information, the House will be informed on what we intend to do.

Comments were made about Gulf veterans' illnesses and 400 deaths. There have been 400 deaths among the group of those suffering illnesses; not 400 deaths from the illnesses. It is nice to be able to claim expert knowledge on a subject, and I am an epidemiologist. As such, I have considered the advice that we have received on Gulf veterans' illnesses.

The major study was done by the university of Manchester to determine whether Gulf veterans were experiencing greater ill health than service personnel who did not take part in the conflict. The results of the mortality component were published in *The Lancet* on 1 July. The study found that the number of deaths and the causes of death in the comparison group that did not deploy to the Gulf were similar to those recorded among Gulf veterans. There was a very small excess of deaths among Gulf veterans, but that was due to road traffic accidents. Despite my many years of experience in medicine, I cannot come up with a credible hypothesis for how or why that should be, except to suggest that it is the kind of random finding that often arises from epidemiological data.

The university of Manchester's work on ill health and morbidity among Gulf veterans is complete. The manuscript is currently being prepared for submission to a fully peer-reviewed scientific journal. When it reaches the public domain, it will do so with the authoritative backing of whichever journal pays to publish it. Hon. Members will await publication with great interest.

I suppose that I should say something about European defence since so many Conservative Members mentioned it. No doubt it would disappoint and frustrate all the old Atlanticists among them and sundry others if I did not. I am sure that they would be happy to know that we continue to make good progress on the European defence initiative—*[Interruption.]* Have I rung the wrong note there, perhaps? The United Kingdom has played a leading role over the past year—*[Interruption.]* I note that Conservative delight knows no bounds at that. Our priority is to improve European military capabilities via the headline goal so that European nations may make a better contribution to NATO and take effective action when the whole alliance is not engaged. Kosovo has surely shown that Europe needs to pull its own weight.

The UK is pleased with the work done so far to flesh out the headline goal requirement into a detailed list of the forces and capabilities required for EU-led crisis management operations. Real capability improvements do not happen overnight—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The Minister said, reading further.

Dr. Moonie: Given the quality of reporting of defence issues in the Conservative press, such as in today's

Daily Mail, one must read things out very carefully. No doubt many Conservative editorials have already been prepared following some of the speeches in this debate. I note that the journalists are not waiting upstairs with bated breath to hear what I have to say. Their minds may already be made up. At least, when the record is read, it will show exactly what I said, and nothing else.

Mr. Forth: The *Daily Record*?

Dr. Moonie: Perhaps even the *Daily Record*, although it is more than I dare hope that I might find a report of my speech in that paper tomorrow, unless I phone it in myself, which I have no intention of doing.

I can assure the House that NATO will remain the cornerstone of our security and defence policy. By strengthening the European pillar of NATO, we will strengthen NATO as a whole. We are not creating a European army, or a standing rapid reaction force. Individual countries will decide whether, when and how to commit their forces.

We hope by the time of the European Council in December 2000 to include certain commitments—a commitment to deliver the necessary capabilities to implement the headline goal; substantial progress towards permanent EU, NATO, and Berlin plus arrangements; definitive proposals for a functioning EU military committee and EU military staff in order that permanent bodies can be established soon after; and—

Mr. Howard: Why, if the only objective is to strengthen the European pillar of NATO, is it necessary to set up all these committees outside NATO?

Dr. Moonie: It is a fairly prudent step to take. One cannot see into the future, but there could be a result in the American election next week—unlikely, I trust—which might lead the right hon. and learned Gentleman to different conclusions in a few years' time. The future is not fixed and events may not turn out as right hon. and hon. Members think.

I have one or two minor points to make, but they are nevertheless important to our service men and women, who, as the hon. Member for Salisbury said, are at the core of the debate. The first concerns dog owners in Germany. Proposed legislation may affect some dogs owned by some service men and women, but it will mainly affect the import of such animals. They may be subjected to controls, but nothing worse than that. There is considerable opposition to the legislation within Germany and it is by no means certain that it will proceed.

Cyprus is a difficult problem. Those who went out to Cyprus on the present tour went in the full knowledge that when they came back their pets would have to enter quarantine. We had hoped to extend our proposals to Cyprus, but legislative pressures make that difficult. However, I am in contact with my colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and I shall do my best to resolve the matter. Not quite as many dogs are involved as were mentioned, but I recognise that they pose a problem for many, about which I hope that we shall be able to do something.

There was considerable misunderstanding about anti-malaria tablets. To set the record straight, most troops received anti-malaria tablets before deployment. Those who did not, because of the speed with which they were deployed to Sierra Leone, were provided with an appropriate tablet on deployment. As hon. Members know, there have been a substantial number of cases of malaria, but all affected have made a reasonable recovery. We have taken note of the lessons to be learned. We have not apportioned blame, but we have reinforced the advice given to all our regiments that their members should at all times be prepared for deployment to areas where disease is rife, so appropriate precautions should be taken.

With regard to the MOD internet site, for which I am probably responsible—

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend certainly is.

Dr. Moonie: I had a feeling that I might be. The active pages of the site are regularly updated. In fact, they were updated this afternoon—

Mr. Quentin Davies: I would not pretend that this issue has anything like the importance of dogs and the MOD website, but before the hon. Gentleman sits down, does he intend to say anything about the JSF and the future of our carrier-borne air force?

Dr. Moonie: I did not say—

Sir Peter Emery: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is most unusual for a statement to be made in the middle of a debate, particularly when the Minister has 21 minutes to reply and the statement took approximately four minutes—20 per cent. of the time. It is within your power to extend the debate for another five minutes, and I think that you should do so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): It is not within my power to extend the period of the debate, and, in any case, I thought that the way in which the statement was made was generally accepted by the House.

Dr. Moonie: I apologise that I have not been able to reply to all the points that have been raised. We have not yet come to a decision on the joint strike fighter. There are two American proposals at present, both of which are being taken forward and in both of which we have an interest. We will continue to be closely involved, and the House will continue to be—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is now 7 o'clock, and the motion lapses.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That at the sitting on Tuesday 7th November the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motions in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to Programming of Bills and Deferred Divisions not later than Eight o'clock, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: This motion is not exempted business. It may not be proceeded with.

PETITION

Pensions (Earnings Link)

7 pm

Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans): I bring a petition from Peter Wright and others in my St. Albans constituency, which declares that

in a thriving economy, pensioners do not have their fair share of the nation's wealth.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons restore the link between the basic state pension and earnings.

To lie upon the Table.

Care in the Community

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

7.1 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I am grateful to have the opportunity to raise the regulation of care in the community schemes. I do so following problems with a charity in my constituency called Integrate Services, which I have previously raised in the House. Now that the Charity Commission has made its report on Integrate, it is time to learn the lessons of the whole sorry saga and look at ways of preventing similar occurrences elsewhere.

Despite the problems, I believe strongly in the principle of care in the community. Properly regulated schemes offer their residents a much better quality of life and much better opportunities to participate in the world around them than would otherwise be the case, but it is important that we get the framework for the schemes right. They must be properly regulated precisely because they deal with some very vulnerable people.

Care in the community schemes have not always been properly regulated. The problem goes back to the way in which schemes were set up. In the 1980s, there was much pressure to move some of the responsibilities of health and social care on to independent providers. There is no doubt that that move was partly ideologically driven. At the same time, the pressure was on to empty our long-stay hospitals, and little thought was given to the legal framework within which the schemes operated, to their governance or to the need to protect the rights of residents. At the same time, as my hon. Friend the Minister will be aware, major changes were taking place in the health service, with purchaser-provider splits, the reconfiguration of health authorities and the creation of trusts.

It was the combination of that ideological pressure and the constantly changing roles of staff that meant that the necessary checks and balances were not built into the system. The system relies largely on good will. If we are honest, good will usually works, but we have to have a system that caters for the worst cases and has at its heart the protection of vulnerable people, many of whom, like those with whom I have dealt at Integrate, are without friends or family to speak on their behalf.

As my hon. Friend knows, the real problem is that the schemes are hybrids. They are often run by charities, but many of the charities are not fundraising organisations. They rely almost entirely on public money—usually on section 64 grants. Yet charity law is designed mainly to deal with fundraising organisations. The charities that run care in the community schemes have contracts with health authorities, but health authorities cannot force them to comply with certain requirements because the charities are regulated by charity law. The position has not been thought through.

Following the problems in my constituency, I spoke to many people in the health authority, in social services and in the voluntary sector. I am grateful to them for taking the time to discuss the matter with me. I want to offer a few modest proposals to take us forward.

It is clear that many health authorities do not have a strategic policy for developing care in the community. There is no requirement on them to assess client needs,

to look at how those needs will change over time or to produce projections of likely demand. The staff who have most contact with people in care in the community schemes—general practitioners and community staff—are not brought into the process at all. In some respects, the whole modernisation agenda has passed care in the community by. I suggest that we should deal with that by requiring health authorities to include in their health improvement programmes an explicit section on care in the community, so that schemes can be planned and developed in conjunction with the providers.

The relationship between the health authority and the various providers will always be difficult. Too much contact will provoke allegations of interference, but too little means poor oversight of how public money is being spent. We need a simple mechanism to deal with that. Conditions should be attached to the award of a section 64 grant that would require care in the community organisations to make a brief annual report to the health authority.

In its report on Integrate Services, the Charity Commission recommended such an annual report. That report should deal with such matters as the funds that have been obtained, how they were spent and how much surplus was retained. When a charity is involved, the report should also notify the health authority of any changes in the objects of the charity. It should list the appointment of new trustees, the reasons for their appointment and the skills that they bring to the organisation.

I realise that some of those points might be somewhat contentious, but my experience with Integrate—when a charity changed its objects so as to widen its area of operation, but was under no obligation to notify the health authority, its main funder, despite the fact that the health authority had the locus only to fund care in Warrington—leads me to believe that such provisions are essential. There are other examples relating to that charity. Friends of the chief executive were appointed as trustees. One of them had been dismissed from the health service for gross misconduct. As the Charity Commission report pointed out, the trustees had very little concept of what their duties were.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will encourage health authorities to look again at their contracting process. Contracts should cover matters such as the training that staff can expect. Authorities should ensure that there are schemes to deal with providers obligations under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. In the case of the charity to which I referred, it was clear that staff had not always received the training that they had the right to expect. There was no procedure for dealing with whistleblowers, who were harassed and intimidated by management.

We should encourage health authorities to go even further in their contracts. They should ensure that independent advocates have a right of access to care in the community schemes and that there is agreement on how residents' personal finances should be dealt with. In the case that I mentioned above, when the health authority decided to change the provider, independent advocates spoke to residents and uncovered some heart-rending stories. If the advocates had had access earlier, many of the problems might have been prevented.

The Government rightly want to ensure that advocates are included on hospital trusts; how much more important it is that people with mental health problems or learning difficulties, who have no friends or family to speak on their behalf, should have access to advocacy. That is a matter of basic human rights—as is ensuring that residents have access to their own benefit entitlements, instead of being dependent on cash handouts from staff. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will discuss with our friends in the Department of Social Security the current practice of allowing the mobility component of disability living allowance to be paid to managers of residential homes. In my view it is a pernicious practice and contrary to the rights of residents.

Health authorities should ensure that they have in their contracts an agreement on surpluses. Everyone accepts that organisations need a reasonable operating surplus, but the situation that occurred at Integrate—which, on an annual turnover of about £700,000, was building up a surplus almost equivalent to that of its successor organisation, which had national revenues of £22 million—cannot be allowed to occur again. It is a matter of ensuring that money given for the care of residents is used for that care, not to build up other assets for a charity.

Each contract should include an agreed exit strategy, so that if the health authority decides to move to another provider, it is able to contact staff to say what is going on. In my constituency, the health authority had no right to the names and addresses of staff working in Integrate Services, and they were fed a host of rumours by their management about what would happen to them.

That process of ensuring that proper matters are dealt with in the contract and in an annual report would seem to me to go a long way to improve the situation. The health authority could then annually conduct a short, sharp accountability review before it decided whether to make another grant.

Health authorities on their own cannot resolve the problem. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister is not responsible for the Charity Commission and I do not have time tonight to list what I believe to be all the faults in the Charity Commission's procedures, but it is undoubtedly true that it is too slow in conducting section 8 investigations. In the case of Integrate Services, the commission was notified in May 1999 of concerns about the charity but did not begin an investigation until September of that year, and did not report until September this year—long after the health authority had moved to another provider. That is simply not acceptable in a case that involves vulnerable people in residential homes, and it allows a crisis to build up.

In my view, the Charity Commission does not take these cases seriously enough, as instanced by the fact in this case that it was March 2000 before it appointed new trustees to the charity, as it was perfectly entitled to do, and that it never served an order on the charity requiring the production of papers. There are still allegations that the chief executive removed various papers from the charity. It is not surprising, then, that the Charity Commission could not reach a final view on many of the allegations because paperwork simply was not there.

The Charity Commission should do more. It should become much more proactive in giving advice to charities on governance and good practice, instead of waiting until problems occur. It needs to give advice on trustees'

[Helen Jones]

duties—such as advice on their relationships with chief officers, and on the sort of professional advice that they should be taking on certain matters. That is particularly crucial in small organisations, and if that had happened in this case, we might not have seen the problems that occurred with trustees. We might not have had the nonsense whereby an officer of the Royal College of Nursing acted as adviser to the trustees, when many of the complaints dealt with one of the senior officers of the charity, who was herself a former senior officer of the RCN, and no one saw that there was a conflict of interest. Trustees should have been given advice on that. I hope that, in future, my hon. Friend the Minister will discuss those matters with the Home Office, to see how we can proceed.

Lastly, I want to touch on the subject of the regulation of residential homes. We can talk about the duties of trustees—and they are very important—but everyone knows that much of the day-to-day care depends on senior managers who are running those homes. The Care Standards Act 2000 is a great step forward in improving residential care, but I hope that my hon. Friend will consider carefully whether inspectors should not also have the right to satisfy themselves about the arrangements for the recruitment, appraisal and monitoring of registered managers in such homes. They have the crucial day-to-day role. If inspectors have any concerns, they should also be able to call for a care audit by an outside organisation.

Our aim should be to prevent problems from arising and, when they do, we should ensure that they are dealt with a soon as possible. It is my firm view that the previous Government left us with a mish-mash of regulations on care in the community that simply do not work when problems occur. Our aim should be to ensure that vulnerable people are much better protected than they are and that we have a coherent strategy for providing and monitoring care in the community and for ensuring that such people receive the best possible services that we can provide. I hope that my hon. Friend will consider what his Department can do and, in the longer term, will examine the issues that need to be discussed with other Departments.

7.16 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) on raising this subject and on her interest in ensuring that public resources in the national health service are used properly and effectively. I am also grateful to her for the opportunity to deal with some of the wider issues that she has raised and to reassure her that the Government share her concern to make sure that the highest possible standards of care are provided to people in care homes in future. In doing that, I hope that I will be able to confirm to her that we have the coherent strategy for improving services that she seeks.

I also wish to confirm that the modernisation process that we have set in train will not bypass community care. The new arrangements for improved planning between health authorities and local authorities that we have put in place, the use of the flexibilities in the Health Act 1999 on pool budgets and other arrangements and now the creation of new care trusts will lead to the progress that my hon. Friend wants.

I start by addressing the concerns that she has raised again about Integrate Services and its use of section 64 grant money received from the North Cheshire health authority. She raised her concerns with me earlier in the year and also during an earlier Adjournment debate in February to which the Minister of State, Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), replied.

Since then, as my hon. Friend has reminded the House, the Charity Commission has completed its investigation into the organisation. In its report, published in September, the commission found no evidence of fraud on the part of the trustees of Integrate Services. However the report criticised Integrate Services for poor management and poor financial and accounting procedures.

In particular, the commission found no evidence of detailed and effective systems for recording the use of charity expenditure and senior staff time. It also found that insufficient attention was given to ensuring that management and staff had the appropriate range of skills and experience needed in running such an organisation and considered that the trustees had failed to institute sufficiently robust checks and report-back arrangements on the effective systems of management control. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the report adds that some of the misunderstandings and disagreements that arose between Integrate Services and the health authority over spending could have been avoided had a full service specification been in place, and with better communication. Again, my hon. Friend has expressed her concerns about the lack of both.

The section 64 grant to Integrate Services ceased in March this year and the organisation has now gone into liquidation. However, ensuring adequate control over such public finds remains an issue to which we attach the highest importance. We have taken action, as the result of the case to which my hon. Friend has referred, to ensure that better and clearer procedures are in place in future surrounding the use of section 64 grants. I will say more about the changes that we have made shortly.

It might help my hon. Friend if I explain how the section 64 grant scheme works, and I shall do that as briefly as I can. At a national level, the Department itself gives grants to voluntary bodies in the health and social care sector. Applications for these grants are subject to close checking, including a check of the organisation's accounts. My officials keep in regular touch with the voluntary body to monitor whether the money is being spent for the purpose that it was given. During the life of the grant the voluntary body must identify its grant expenditure in its annual accounts and the Department checks these.

Several bodies are also selected annually for value-for-money audits by our auditors. Any signs of misuse of grants, lax accounting or poor value will be followed up. Through these arrangements the Department seeks to ensure that section 64 grants are spent in the way that we intended and are properly accounted for. These arrangements are kept under review in the light of events. I am satisfied that they enable us to identify a situation such as that at Integrate Services.

At local level, health authorities also have powers to give section 64 grants to voluntary bodies in their areas, and my hon. Friend has expressed her concern about this. First and foremost, the section 64 grant scheme is an effective and important way of developing local partnerships between the national health service and independent providers. I am sure that my hon. Friend will welcome this close partnership working. She, like the Government, believe in partnership working in this area. It can lead to an improvement in services and good use of public resources.

Health authorities have a wide discretion over the terms and conditions that they apply to the use of grant by recipient bodies, though these must all be in keeping with the wider objectives of the NHS. As in their other financial dealings, they are required to exercise the standards of financial management control that is specified in their standing orders and standing financial instructions. These follow the normal conventions for public bodies. Authorities are subject to audit on that performance.

The example of Warrington Integrate Services is unusual. In our experience, it is rare for relationships between voluntary bodies and health authorities, founded on section 64 grants, to give rise to such problems. That in itself is evidence of the robustness of section 64 as a financial mechanism. None the less, the Warrington Integrate Services case has caused us to consider the general lessons to be learned from what went wrong. I pay tribute again to my hon. Friend for helping us to do that.

In particular, we have considered again the guidance that is available to health authorities in exercising their grant-aiding powers. As a result of the Warrington case, we have strengthened the guidance to help prevent, wherever possible, any repeat of this sort of problem in future. The revised guidance, which I am happy to send to my hon. Friend, emphasises the importance of there being a clear shared understanding about the purpose for which grant is, or is not, intended. It puts particular stress on monitoring to provide the necessary assurance that the original decision to award a grant remains valid, and that value for money continues to be secured. That is important at any time, but especially so when considering requests for renewal of grant.

The new guidance makes it clear that grant renewal should be managed as an active rather than a merely passive process. So, for example, we would expect authorities to be aware if a body was starting to build up a cash surplus on the basis of grants received, and if so to adjust any future grants to take account of that. At worst, if it became evident that money has not been, or is not being, used for the purposes set out in the grant conditions, it would be open to the authority to seek recovery at law. I hope that my hon. Friend is reassured by the steps that we have taken as a response to the problems that she helped to identify with Integrate Services.

I listened carefully to what my hon. Friend said about health authorities' responsibilities in working with the independent health care and social care sectors. Officials are working on guidance that will include model contracts to help social health and care communities to engage more effectively with the independent sector. It will make explicit the responsibilities of both the commissioners of services and the providers of care, ensuring the delivery of services that people need. The contracts will reflect the national minimum standards which we are currently developing and which will be applied by the new National Care Standards Commission.

In addition, we have published a concordat, which aims to develop the way in which the NHS should commission services from the independent sector. The Government see an important role for the independent sector, working in partnership with the NHS and local authorities, in the provision of services for older people. As highlighted in the NHS plan published earlier this year, the Government are developing a wide range of intermediate care services—as it were a bridge between hospital and home—to prevent avoidable admissions, to enhance rehabilitation and to enable as many people as possible to maintain or regain functional independence at home. That can be achieved in a number of ways, partly by investing more in NHS services, including giving new life to community hospitals, and partly by entering into new arrangements with the independent sector.

The whole-system approach, which is essential to the development of intermediate care, should be exactly that. There should be an inclusive approach that recognises the contribution made by all partners in the health and social care system. As part of this approach, the Government are currently exploring the opportunities for developing arrangements that would enable the best use of facilities, both in the NHS and in the independent sector.

The concordat highlights three particular areas for co-operative working—elective care, critical care and intermediate care—and it will be for local agencies to decide on the best way of providing services to meet the needs of their local population. The Independent Healthcare Association, a signatory to the concordat, has been contributing to the intermediate care debate and supports the introduction of contracts of the sort to be included in the guidance.

The measures that we are taking to reform the current regulatory arrangements for social services will also help to ensure that social care providers, whether private, voluntary or statutory, are properly regulated in terms of their financial probity, management and provision of care.

The Care Standards Act 2000 received Royal Assent in July, and I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for the measures that we introduced in it. The Act will establish for the first time an independent National Care Standards Commission, responsible for regulating social care services. The legislation also enables the introduction for the first time of national minimum standards in care settings, and extends statutory regulation to care services which have not up to now been regulated at all.

As I hope my hon. Friend will agree, all these measures will help drive up standards of care, ensure better public information about the quality of care services and improve safeguards for those who use these vital services.

The National Care Standards Commission will ensure that all regulated care providers meet the Government's national minimum standards through a system of registration, inspection and enforcement. National standards, which are currently being developed, will apply to all providers. They will ensure that providers will be clear about the standards that they must meet to gain and maintain registration, and they will ensure that users and their carers know what they can expect as a minimum. They will cover key issues relating to staff recruitment and training.

[Mr. John Hutton]

National standards will also address issues relating to the way in which care organisations are run, including the suitability of those who manage care homes. Care providers will have to demonstrate the financial viability of the establishment and have in place appropriate financial systems to ensure continued good management.

As my hon. Friend is no doubt aware, we are also establishing the General Social Care Council, which will be in operation from next October. It will raise public confidence in social care standards and promote best practice in social care.

The council will be responsible for registration of the social care work force. One of its first tasks will be the publication of enforceable codes of conduct and practice for all social care staff. It will also draw up an enforceable code of best practice for employers, which will include good recruitment practices and rigorous checks on recruits, so that unsuitable people do not enter the work force in the first place.

Providers will have to ensure that their staff receive a copy of the General Social Care Council code of conduct, and National Care Standards Commission inspectors will check that staff know what is expected of them. Registration of individuals will be subject to the person being of good character, being physically and mentally fit for all or part of the work for which registration is sought, and satisfying the requirements of conduct and competence that the council will lay down.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of advocacy services for providers and users, particularly in the area of learning disability. However, advocacy is not just about human rights, although I recognise the strength of the argument that she made. Advocacy is also about improving practice and services, because listening to what patients and users say about the services that they have received is an important lesson for all health and local authorities.

Advocacy services can play an important role in helping people get the best out of the social care services that are available. Self-advocacy groups have worked with the Department on the new national learning disability strategy. My hon. Friend will be glad to know that that is to be published as a White Paper early next year, and we are looking at how we can develop services in this area.

With the development of the new guidance for health authorities in relation to their dealings with the independent sector, and through the new regulatory system that will operate from April 2002 onwards, I hope that my hon. Friend will be reassured that we are taking coherent measures to ensure that users are fully protected and providers of care are properly regulated.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend once again for raising these important matters with me, and I look forward to working closely with her in the future to ensure that our common objectives to improve both the quality of care and the use of public resources can be realised.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Seven o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 24 October 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Middle East

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. McNulty.*]

10 am

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Given the serious nature of what is happening in the middle east, it is appropriate that it is the subject of the first debate to be held in this Chamber after the summer recess. I shall limit my remarks because I know that many hon. Members wish to contribute to the discussion. Everyone is concerned about what has been happening and the threat not only to Palestine, but to the stability of the entire region. We are all disturbed at the loss of life and the horrific scenes that have been displayed on our television screens during the past few weeks.

One matter that needs to be made clear is that the majority of the people who have lost their lives or who have been shot or otherwise injured have been Palestinian. Such a fact is not new; the majority of those who have been injured or killed each time violence has erupted in the West Bank and Gaza have been Palestinian. That is the inevitable result of both the fire power of the Israeli army and the use of disproportionate force when dealing with demonstrators.

A report in the Israeli newspaper *Ha' Aretz* last week suggested that the authorisation of live fire orders in response to Palestinian stone throwers for local Israeli force commanders has become more relaxed. That implies that throwing a stone could be life threatening and that it warrants a lethal response. International guidelines for the use of force and law enforcement officials, including the Israeli forces in occupied territories, say that action should be taken that is in proportion to the seriousness of the event and that firearms should be used only in self defence or in defence against the imminent threat of death or serious injury. Such authorisation suggests that Israeli forces in flak jackets in armoured vehicles are at risk of death or serious injury from stone throwing.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Does my hon. Friend accept that among the Palestinian crowds are people with guns, although it is true that younger people—perhaps without guns—have been put in the front line?

Mr. Gerrard: There is no question but that shots have been fired, but given all the events that have occurred, I have no doubt that there has been excessive use of force. Resolution 1322 of the United Nations Security Council, which was passed a few days ago by 14 votes to zero—with only the United States of America abstaining—states that acts of violence are condemned,

> especially the excessive use of force against Palestinians, resulting in injury and loss of human life.

It states that Israel, as the occupying power, should abide

> by its legal obligations and its responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

That is the view of the United Nations Security Council.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that the horrifying picture, which I am sure shocked everybody, of the little 12-year-old boy cowering next to his father before he was shot, was manifestly a case of somebody being killed who was not in the front line and nowhere near a sniper.

Mr. Gerrard: In years to come, when people look back on the events of the past few weeks, the picture to which my hon. Friend referred is the image that will remain in people's minds.

Everyone wants the violence to stop, but we must look beyond what has happened in the past few weeks and the efforts that are now being made to obtain not a peace settlement but a ceasefire, and consider why we have reached this point. I have heard it suggested that the Palestinian leadership was trying to ruin the peace process and orchestrated what happened. There have even been suggestions that we were a small step from a final settlement, that Camp David would provide the solution, and that all that was required was an agreement on Jerusalem. Those suggestions are misleading, as the events that we are discussing show. Whatever the importance of Jerusalem, and irrespective of the fact that Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the al-Aqsa mosque triggered the violence, recent events show that something was happening on a much deeper level and that many Palestinians feel a deep sense of frustration, bitterness and anger.

Mr. Stephen Twigg (Enfield, Southgate): Will my hon. Friend acknowledge that Prime Minister Barak has gone further than any previous Israeli prime minister in agreeing certain points with the Palestinians in the Camp David talks, and that the withdrawal of Yasser Arafat from that process triggered the crisis?

Mr. Gerrard: I do not believe that the withdrawal of Yasser Arafat triggered the crisis. The Prime Minister of Israel may have gone further than his predecessors, but that begs the question whether he has gone far enough to deliver a viable and lasting solution.

In the past few years, the peace process has not given all Palestinians better economic conditions, and refugees are no nearer to returning to their homes than they were at the beginning of the process. When we consider the reports of yesterday's violence in Hebron, we must ask the obvious question: what are Israeli troops doing there? I remember from the first time I went to Hebron, some years ago, that right in the centre of that Arab city there is a tiny Israeli settlement of 200 people. At that time, there was a wall down the main road, with Israeli settlers allowed on one side and Palestinians on the other. The settlements scattered throughout the West Bank, in the middle of Arab cities like Hebron, Nablus, Ramallah and so on, mean that the Israeli army has to be present. Those settlements remain, as they always have been, illegal; they are the reason why the West Bank has been carved up,

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why Palestinians cannot travel freely and why there is no Palestinian state but a series of bantustans with no free travel or connections between them. The presence of those troops reminds every Palestinian every day that they are living in an occupied land, and that the final arbiters of what they may do and where they can go are not the Palestine National Authority or Yasser Arafat but the Israeli occupying forces. That key question has not been addressed in the past few years. The issue is not simply one of land.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Gerrard: If I may, I will continue as I want to leave as much time as possible for other Members to speak.

This is more than just a question of the occupied land; it is a question of the Palestinian people. I observed on a recent visit to the region that the refugees and displaced people feel most keenly that they have lost their identity as a people. This is also more than a question of land because the carving up and the lack of freedom have left the Palestinian leadership unable to have any normal political contact and involvement with its citizens. It is limited as to what it can do as an authority. That is why calls to Yasser Arafat to stop are futile; they assume mechanisms and a degree of control that simply are not there.

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): I have a quote on which my hon. Friend might wish to comment. It says:

> The Supreme Monitoring Committee of the National Arab and Islamic forces call upon the masses of our people to immediately assemble in the streets and public squares in order to express their rage and strong stand against the barbaric Israeli aggression and their determination to continue the intifada.

That is a direct quote from official Palestinian television. Will my hon. Friend comment on that in relation to the so-called spontaneous, unorganised acts of protest and violence?

Mr. Gerrard: Any suggestion that such a statement, made on Palestinian television, would be sufficient to bring people out on to the streets shows a fundamental lack of understanding of what is happening, of the feelings of the people in the camps and of those who have been displaced. Furthermore, the view that Yasser Arafat is now an unreliable partner also shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation. All Palestinians, whatever their political opinion, will say that they regard the PLO as the sole legitimate negotiating representative of the Palestinian people. However, if we want a long-term solution, we must recognise that the negotiations that have taken place over the past few years have not been negotiations between equal partners, but between an occupying power and an occupied people. They have been negotiations in which the role of the United States has not been seen by the Palestinians or the Arab countries to be that of an honest broker.

In regard to the region as a whole, the effects on other states must also be taken into account if we are to reach a solution. Other states in the region are now the host countries to hundreds of thousands of refugees. What attempts have been made over the past few years to examine the rights of those refugees? They have rights that are recognised under international law and in UN resolutions. The most recent UN Security Council resolution, 1322, goes back to the basic questions. It reminds us of the demands of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338.

We regard at our peril recent events as the product of a single happening in Jerusalem which led to an explosive reaction, and which can be dealt with simply by returning to the Camp David agenda. We need to take a step back and think about what will be needed to deliver long-term peace in the region. That would be in the interests of every country in the region, including Israel. Everyone knows what the elements of a long-term peace are. They are not new. They include Jerusalem and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state, which would involve a withdrawal from occupied territories—not a percentage of occupied territories. UN resolutions have made it clear again and again that what is needed is a withdrawal from occupied territories and a recognition of refugees' rights of return.

The problem is not solely for Israel and the Palestinians. It has international dimensions. Anyone who has visited the region will have been reminded time and again of our historic responsibilities there. The problem has an international dimension. International law and UN resolutions are involved. It is not sufficient to leave international involvement almost entirely to the United States. We need to consider our role and that of the EU. The problem may be more difficult now. Although we may be seen to be going backwards at the moment, we need to step back a little to consider the medium and long term, how to deliver a settlement and how to use our influence internationally to do so, rather than relying as we have on what has been unbalanced negotiation between an occupying power and people who have experienced occupation.

10.16 am

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I congratulate the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) on securing the debate, although I approach the matter from a slightly different point of view. He has done us a service in doing so.

I join the hon. Gentleman in his expression of sadness over the loss of life that has been occasioned in the conflict in the holy land. As is only fair, I recognise, as did he, that the majority of those who have sustained casualties were members of the Palestinian community. There have been casualties on the Israeli side, too, but the majority have been Palestinians. There have been many tragic incidents on both sides.

I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about the events that have taken place. However, it would be a mistake to dwell too long on the mechanics of events in the conflict. I have some sympathy with the balanced approach of Amnesty International in a letter to today's newspapers, which considers Israeli methods of crowd control and the Palestinian authorities' failure to control those who participate in the uprising.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned proportionality. He must recognise the fair point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) that, if Israeli

soldiers are fired on by Palestinian gunmen, it is proportional for them to return fire. However, that recognition does not condone everything that has taken place.

The hon. Gentleman gave us his analysis. I disagree with his view that the two sides are unequal. Each side has something to offer the other that only it can give. Israel has a tremendous desire for security. That is the uppermost consideration in the minds of Israeli citizens, a fact that conditioned how they voted in recent elections. The Palestinians want fulfilment of their rights, economic improvement and autonomy leading to eventual statehood, which they have never had.

The hon. Gentleman dwelt too long on the mechanics of what has taken place. He failed to appreciate the wider political context and, especially, to acknowledge that the Government came to power in Israel in May 1999, after a period of stagnation in the peace process, with a clear mandate for peace and security for the Israeli people.

The Israeli Government have kept faith with that pledge, pushing forward the peace process at both Sharm El-Sheikh in September 1999 and Camp David earlier this year. We should not overlook the fact that they have done so in the face of severe internal difficulties. Whatever else one can say about Israeli democracy, besides the fact that it is the only democracy in the middle east—that it is a good thing as a democracy is not an especially good advertisement for proportional representation—in the face of internal difficulties, the Israeli Government have tried to push forward the peace process. There is dispute about exactly how much was offered in the Camp David agreement. However, I remind the hon. Gentleman that a large number of commentators—many of them speaking from an objective position—regard Prime Minister Barak as having offered a great deal to the Palestinians in the negotiations. They have also commented on his willingness to compromise on some of the most vexed issues at stake, including the most vexed of all: Jerusalem. Those offers and concessions were made in the face of severe difficulties.

It is sad that nothing came from those offers and that the peace process could not be taken further forward at that stage. I agree that subsequent events were tragic. The hon. Member for Walthamstow said that Mr. Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount was provocative. Many members of the Jewish community in my constituency have told me that the visit was provocative and ill judged. Whatever one's view of Mr. Sharon's personality or of the place that he visited, however, one could not suggest that his visit justified the subsequent outpouring of violence. That was a mere visit to a religious site, but at least one of the holiest sites of Judaism has been desecrated—the tomb of Joseph. I do not think, therefore, that particular parties can be regarded to have demonstrated great sensitivity to religious sites.

It is hard to resist the conclusion that Mr. Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount was not the cause of what has occurred, but the occasion. It is also hard to resist the suspicion that, even if the violence was not encouraged by some members of the Palestinian leadership, it was at least condoned. It has certainly been fuelled by the Palestinian media, including its state-controlled elements.

Mr. Connarty: The hon. Gentleman has a constituency interest and is playing heavily to it. He appears, however, to have entirely ignored the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard). He did not mention the 200,000 people who are living in settlements in what is supposed eventually to be an independent and autonomous state for the Palestinians. He did not mention any detail about the so-called offer on Jerusalem. He is dancing on the head of a pin on the issue, presumably for votes, and is ignoring the cause of the problem. The territory is occupied and Israel appears to intend to remain the occupier.

Mr. Clappison: I had hoped that I had explained sufficiently clearly for the hon. Gentleman that Israel was seeking security more than anything else. Of course, there are demands on both sides and we could consider in detail the wider background, including refugees. The hon. Gentleman and other Labour Members must be realistic about the matter and accept that there is a framework within which compromise can occur. Furthermore, they should accept that security is the Israelis' main consideration within that framework. I could go back into the past and speak about all the grievances that have arisen, such as the bus bombs in Tel Aviv, various terrorist acts, invasions of Israeli territory by overseas terrorists, the work of the Hamas, the Hezbollah and the Iraqis, and all of the other poison that keeps pouring out of the situation, but it would not do any good. There is a compromise to be made on both sides. I would certainly encourage the Israelis to compromise, but it is my view that the Israeli Government have a clear mandate for peace, have been prepared to offer concessions and compromises and have stretched forward the hand of peace, but have yet to receive an embrace in return. I hope that that will come, but things look very bleak at the moment.

What is Israeli public opinion? Israel is a democracy. At the end of the day, the Israeli Government can make concessions only in line with public opinion. Let me tell the hon. Member for Falkirk, East (Mr. Connarty) that that opinion was strongly in favour of making concessions for peace. What are the Israelis supposed to make of the scenes of the intifada, the resulting violence and the attitude of the Palestinian media? I do not want to go into detail on particular instances, such as a dreadful incident involving a 12-year-old child at a crossroads in Gaza. Another terrible incident involved the lynching of members of the Israeli armed forces in a Palestinian police station. Whatever the reasons why they were there, I presume that they were under the protection of the Palestinian state.

What is Israeli opinion meant to make of all this? My conclusion—I know that many other hon. Members wish to speak in this debate—is that, if there is to be a peace process in the future, and the prospects look bleak at the moment, it can happen only on the lines that were discussed at Camp David and previously, with concessions on both sides. The basic framework for those concessions, and for that peace process, is security for Israel in return for Israel meeting the aspirations of

[Mr. Clappison]

the Palestinian people, and making the concessions that are sought in return. Up to now, many among the Israeli electorate and leadership have been prepared to make those concessions, but that does not diminish the fact that things look extremely bleak at the moment.

In the brief time remaining, I should like to stress two things. I ask the Government to impress on the Palestinian leadership that resorting to, condoning or allowing uprisings and violence as a negotiating tactic and way of seeking further concessions will not, in fact, bring further concessions. It is a way of driving the parties away from the peace process. I would encourage our Government to use whatever offices they have to impress on them that violence will not bring returns at the negotiating table, and that if the violence continues, the aid that this country gives to Palestine, which I and my constituents, as taxpayers, are happy to give to Palestinians to improve their lamentable economic conditions, will be put in doubt. Surely we cannot justify giving such aid if the Palestinians continue to resort to violence of such proportions.

We must also be concerned that the violence and tension do not spill over into this country. People on both sides of the debate hold strong views, and should be free to express those views. They should do so without any violence or threat of violence. People should not be put in fear because they are a member of a particular religion or race. I know that there are concerns within the Jewish community about certain incidents. I do not want to overplay those, but I urge the Government to ensure that the violence does not spill over into this country, and that people and the right of free speech are protected.

Things look bleak at present, but I hope that one day the parties will be able to return to the peace process. There are other factors in favour of a peace process, and each side has something to offer the other, although a great deal lies in the way of that at present. I hope that, at some stage in the future, the obstructions to peace can be cleared.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next hon. Member, I remind all hon. Members that this is a short debate in which many people want to take part. Hon. Members should be brief to allow as many people as possible to speak.

10.28 am

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): In mid-September, before the current disturbances began, a festival called Palestine 2000 took place in Rubery church centre, about half a mile from where I live in Birmingham. The idea behind the festival was the promotion of a greater understanding of the Palestinian people, who they are, where they live, and the conditions under which they live. One of the main speakers was a visitor from Israel, a Melkite priest called Abuna Elias Chacour. He is a Palestinian and an Israeli citizen, and has been involved in the Mar Elias education institution for the last 30 years, in the village of Ibullin in Galilee. The objective of that institution is to promote greater understanding between Jews, Christians and Muslims. One of the brightest students of one of the schools involved was a young man called Asel Asleh, who was 17 years old. He was involved in an organisation called Seeds of Peace, an American programme involving more than 800 Arab and Israeli teenagers and other young people who go to summer camps together. This was all designed to promote dialogue. To quote from *The Washington Post*, Asel was

> by all accounts, a model of what a Seed should be—an immoderately prolific e-mailer and letter writer and phone caller who invested time and energy into making Jewish friends and keeping them.

Asel is now dead. The report in *The Washington Post* continues:

> What happened with Asel—how he died—is in question. He was killed in a clash on Monday with Israeli forces on the outskirts of his village, Arabeh, in Upper Galilee. Whether he was throwing stones, helping the wounded or simply watching the action is unclear. More than a half-dozen Israeli Arabs were killed that day, and Israeli police say all died in the riots that swept the region. A spokesman said he could provide no specific information about Asel's death. Asel's family, which saw his body before burial on Tuesday, say his wounds, including extensive bruises to the back, arms and face, suggested he had been beaten with rifle butts before being shot. No autopsy was conducted

into Asel's death.

I mention the case of Asel, not because his death is any more tragic or painful to his relatives and community than any other death in the region—Jewish, Muslim or Christian—but to make the point that it took place not in Gaza or the West Bank, but inside Israel itself. That seems surprising, and, in such circumstances, we, as an overseas Parliament, should ask questions about how an Israeli citizen was denied access to the laws of the land of which he was, apparently, a citizen. It is strange that no autopsy took place, and that no investigation has taken place.

Having made this speech, I reflect on the possibility that we may see a report from the Israeli authorities saying that I have over-simplified the matter and that events were not as I have said. That may be right. I cannot comment on that. However, I can comment on the fact that I find it a little strange that the Israeli authorities reject the notion of an international investigation into what is going on there so that we can establish the truth. If this can happen to a Palestinian who is an Israeli citizen, is it surprising that they feel like second-class citizens in their own land? Is it surprising that they feel that they are, at best, tolerated in the land of Israel, and that they are not equal with other citizens of that country? Is it surprising that they feel such an affinity with Palestinians living in the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip? If that is how Palestinian citizens of Israel feel, what must the situation be like for those who live on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip?

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): I accept what my hon. Friend says about this horrific incident. However, although there is clearly a problem in Israel with the relationship between some Israelis and some Palestinians, does he also accept that 20 per cent. of the electorate in Israel is Arab, and that there are Arab members of the Israeli Parliament, even Ministers, including the Deputy Foreign Minister, who came to the Labour party conference, where I had a chance to

discuss these matters with him? The circumstances are not as simple as my hon. Friend suggests. They are far more complex.

Mr. Burden: The statistics that my hon. Friend quotes are absolutely right. I would not deny that. However, if one talks to Arabs who are Knesset members in Israel, including Asmi Bishara, who stood for Prime Minister of Israel, they will not say that they are treated as equal citizens alongside Jewish Israeli citizens.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Does my hon. Friend accept that, when I met the Deputy Foreign Minister, to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) referred, in Israel, soon after the then Labour Government had taken power, he told us that, in his view, part of his role as an Arab member of the Labour party was to point out to fellow party members the gross discrimination against Arab Israelis? Of course, he does not say that when he is speaking on a platform at the British Labour party conference as a Deputy Foreign Minister, but he has made it clear.

Mr. Burden: My hon. Friend makes the point well.

Mr. Gapes: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Stephen Twigg: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Burden: I shall not give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) again, but I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg).

Mr. Twigg: I do not think that any hon. Members who are friends of Israel would deny discrimination against Israeli Arabs. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South pointed out, the situation is more complex than that outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden). Attacks in Israel by Jewish extremists have been condemned by Prime Minister Barak and by other Israeli political figures. The problem is that Palestinian leaders do not engage in similar condemnation of attacks on Jewish people in the West Bank and other occupied territories.

Mr. Burden: I shall return to the complexities of the situation in a little while. I mentioned Asel to say something about the circumstances of Palestinians in Israel. If that is the position of Palestinians who are Israeli citizens, what is that of Palestinians who are denied citizenship and are not Israeli citizens—those who live under occupation? My hon. Friend said earlier that the present Israeli Prime Minister had offered more concessions than any previous one. That may be the case, but we must ask why an entire people feel the need to say no and to rise up in the manner that we have witnessed during recent weeks.

Often, the concessions and the peace process are discussed in an almost theoretical manner, but it is different if one visits the area and sees what the process has meant to Palestinians on the ground. I was there in June and I saw that Israeli settlement building, which was then the subject of international discussion, was continuing. The evidence of my eyes was such that I did not perceive a great deal of difference between the circumstances that I witnessed this year and those that I saw two years ago when Likud was in power. On that visit, we were warned by a number of Palestinian academics about the road plan that was being designed for the West Bank and Gaza, splitting the area up. Two years later, I found that those roads were either built or were being built. They bypass Palestinian towns and villages and link up settlements that are illegal under international law. I saw Palestinians who felt that their lives and livelihoods were being bypassed and that they were treated as guests in their own land.

This year, I visited a small village called Issawiyya, just outside Jerusalem. I saw with my own eyes Palestinian homes that had been demolished and Palestinian farms that were denied the water that they needed to irrigate their land, when an Israeli settlement across the valley received water in much greater quantities. These are the realities of what has been happening in the area. If we want to end the problems and achieve a settlement in the middle east rather than merely comment on it, we must, sooner or later, confront the realities. Afif Safieh, the Palestinian general delegate to the United Kingdom, made a comment the other day that said a great deal. He remarked that often when the peace process is discussed, it is almost as if we want to achieve an everlasting peace process rather than everlasting peace. We must do all we can to achieve the latter.

My hon. Friends and, indeed, the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), have pointed out that we must recognise the strength of feeling in Israeli public opinion, which I accept. The hon. Gentleman said that it could be tested because Israel was a democracy with an elected Government. However, I ask hon. Members also to consider Palestinian public opinion. Public opinion is not easy to express in an occupied country. What is it that makes a people do what the Palestinians have been doing during the past few weeks? What makes them say that their lives under Israeli occupation can no longer be tolerated? There is no future in the idea, which the Prime Minister of Israel appears to be considering, that the parties involved should take some time out from the peace process and establish firmer borders, possibly splitting the West Bank off on a permanent basis. Israel rightly demands security, but there can be no security in that part of the world unless the peoples there agree to live together and recognise their interdependence. That will not be achieved by fencing people off, destroying their homes and building settlements on land that is illegally occupied.

The fears of Israeli Jews are real and understandable, and the history of the Jewish community bears testament to that fact. I agree with the hon. Member for Hertsmere that those of us with a background of sympathy to the Palestinian cause have a responsibility to state clearly that the issue is not one of religion, and that it should not be allowed to degenerate into a religious issue in this country or anywhere else. However, Israelis must recognise that there is no security in the path that they are currently taking. They need to ensure, if they are to hold up their heads as a democracy in the international community, that they behave as a democracy by respecting international law no less than any other country. They should not allow a

[Mr. Burden]

situation to occur whereby the Palestinian community in Gaza and the West Bank is relegated to living in conditions akin to those of a bantustan.

The international community is right to call for calm and the end of the violence because while the violence continues the chances of a settlement are that much less. However, we must address the causes of the violence. We must tell Israelis that they have the right to live in peace, within secure borders, and we must stand by that, but we must also tell them that they are not above international law. If the words of United Nations resolutions in relation to the Balkans and Kuwait are precious to us, those in relation to the middle east and Palestinian rights should be equally precious to us. Palestinians say that they hear about what the west has done in Kosovo and how it cares about the United Nations, but that there are refugee peoples who lost their homes in 1948 and that United Nations resolution 194, which states that they have the right to return, has never been implemented. They know about resolutions 242 and 338, which have also never been implemented. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate is right to say that the situation is complicated. There can be no quick-fix solution, but sometimes it is important to state that there is a bottom line. We in the international community have an obligation to discuss the bottom line, which is that international law must be the basis of any just settlement, and that that involves the withdrawal from occupied territories, recognition of Palestinian rights and a just solution to the refugee problem.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Before I call the next speaker, I repeat the plea made by my predecessor in the Chair for short speeches. This is an important and current debate in which everyone is interested, so I should like to call as many Members as possible. If hon. Members keep their contributions to three minutes, we shall be able to hear a lot more speeches.

10.43 am

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I believe that it was Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian peace negotiator, who said to me a year ago that there were friends of Israel and friends of Palestine, but that today there were also friends of peace. The House must consider itself a friend of peace. The values that we are expressing today should be shared by all Members. The difficulty for those who have spoken and will no doubt speak this morning in defence of the Israeli Government is that it is becoming clear that their values and approach, methods or "mechanics", as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) described them, are not in the same frame as ours.

I come from a family whose origins were in southern Africa. We had kith and kin in what was then called Rhodesia and in South Africa. As I grew up, it became clear to me that the values that my family had imbued in me were not shared by the people we had previously regarded as our kith and kin in that part of the world. The challenge today for members of the Jewish community in this country and in the United States is to face the prospect that people living in Israel, whom they regard as their kith and kin, may no longer share or act on the values in which they fundamentally believe.

What is at stake is not merely property. My hon. Friend is wrong. Jerusalem is not the major issue in today's debate. The issue is not property but people; it is the Palestinian people and their basic human rights. The fact that those basic human rights were not covered at Camp David sent a signal back to the region that neither side's leadership was in tune with the people whom they represent. Although Prime Minister Barak, a brave man, no doubt went further than any previous Israeli leader in his own terms. it was well known at the time that his coalition was collapsing about his ears, and that there was no certainty that he could go home and deliver even on the promises that he was prepared to make.

A presidential election is being held in the United States, which I visited last week with the Select Committee on Education and Employment. In that context, I was struck by how much more even-handedly the threat to the peace process in the middle east is being presented. There is an increasing awareness in the United States that two sides are involved in the debate, and I hope that following this morning's discussion we can take that awareness forward.

It is the duty of those who represent the Israeli cause in the debate to make it clear to their side that the basic human values to which everyone in this Chamber subscribes must prevail in the middle east, and that we are not prepared to accept even a regime with the patina of respectability and democratic government unless it conforms to international standards.

Like many others, I was horrified by not only the pitiful death of an innocent Palestinian boy but the butchering of two Israeli soldiers. I am reminded of another tragic incident in another place, the butchering of two British soldiers in Northern Ireland, and I ask myself what happened after that incident. Our troops did not go around the streets of Belfast singling out Catholic boys to have them shot and maimed with sniper bullets. The response to the butchering of those Israeli soldiers—

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I shall give way in a moment.

As the Israeli response was reported on the front page of all newspapers in this country, it sent a clear message that we are dealing with a regime that is becoming increasingly detached from the ethos and morals to which we subscribe.

If the Israeli Government are realigned and turn their back on the peace process, that will be as decisive a moment in our consideration of our relations with people in that region as were the Soweto riots of 1963 and 1975 to the attitude of white people in this country to the apartheid regime in South Africa.

10.48 am

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I should like wholeheartedly to associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) in opening the debate, and

for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden), and those of the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn). I shall concentrate on how the Israeli Government are flagrantly breaching the fourth Geneva convention, which clearly sets out the obligations under international law of an occupying power, which is what Israel is in Gaza and the West Bank.

I draw heavily on a press release issued in Israel by B'Tselem, the highly respected Israeli human rights organisation. Many extraordinarily courageous people in Israeli society stand up, putting themselves in great personal danger, in support of the principles of human rights and democracy that I share with most hon. Members in this Chamber. We must remember that, and we should support them because they are the correct voice of Israeli and Jewish values, not some of the acts that are being perpetrated by the Israeli Government.

B'Tselem's press release clearly sets out the need to protect civilians and to distinguish between armed and unarmed persons. It also makes it clear that the fact that the other side does not necessarily stick to the rules does not relieve the Israeli Government from sticking to their obligations under international law. It is clear from the huge number of Palestinian deaths, many of them children, that lethal firearms are being used excessively and inappropriately by the Israeli Government. Of those people who have been wounded or killed, 42 per cent. were under the age of 18 and 40 per cent. had head and eye injuries. It is clear that the Israeli forces are aiming deliberately at people's heads. Furthermore, 72 per cent. of those who have been wounded were injured by live bullets, some even by dumdum bullets that cause appalling injuries.

As for the distinction between armed and unarmed people, I shall read from the e-mail of an American charity worker that was sent to me and to his contacts throughout the United States. Describing what he saw at Netzarim junction in Gaza, he said:

> As ambulances ferried the dead and wounded we spent nearly an hour in the Red Cross/Red Crescent triage center where skilled medical staff were working under the protection of the ICRC...to stop the bleeding before the casualties were taken to hospital operating rooms or morgues. Most of the wounds were from American Apache helicopter gun ships or snipers. Several people far from the onerous fortress intersection dropped to the ground from head wounds

The charity worker said that the people were shot by snipers from 1,000 m or more away, who were picking people out of the crowd from the roof tops. He wrote:

> Four of the awful gunships kept flying over the residential area spraying it with machine gun fire and directing LOW antitank missiles at homes and apartment buildings.

Such action is disproportionate violence and is wholly at variance with Israel's obligations under the Geneva convention. Moreover, it is clear that snipers are being used to shoot unarmed people who are participating in demonstrations against an occupation. The right to demonstrate against occupation is recognised under international law. We are discussing people who are resisting an unlawful occupation.

I refer to other ways in which the Israeli Government have flouted the Geneva convention.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Starkey: No, I shall not give way.

The Israeli Government have not protected wounded persons, medical personnel or ambulances. I draw attention to the infamous shooting of the 12-year-old boy in Gaza. The ambulance man who was attempting to rescue him was also shot and killed. The security forces have not attempted to stop the violence that has been perpetrated by Israeli civilians, yet they are obliged under the Geneva convention to protect Palestinians. On 7 October, settlers attacked the village of Bourin and destroyed two medical clinics. They shot and killed 22-year-old Fahed Mustafa Baqer in Biddiya and besieged villages around Nablus. The recent shooting in that area was provoked by armed settlers under the protection of the Israeli army, which tried to reassert its illegal occupation of settlements around Nablus.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Starkey: No, I shall not give way.

There has been interference with the freedom of movement of ordinary civilians in the West Bank. There have been widespread closures in the area. Sick patients have been unable to reach medical care. A 37-year-old man died of renal failure because he was unable to reach hospital for his regular dialysis because of closures. Three journalists were shot and wounded by the military near Ramallah on 21 October, one of whom reported for *Paris Match*—not a journal that is usually associated with such situations. The two other journalists reported for *Agence France Presse* and one for Wattan Television. The day before that a photographer was shot near Khan Younis.

There has been collective punishment—again, in flagrant disregard of international law. The closures are collective punishments of the whole civilian population because of the violence of a minor fraction of that population. Water has been cut off to villages near Jenin. Buildings have been demolished.

Mrs. Ellman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Starkey: No.

If we are to have a just and viable peace in the middle east, we must have a new peace process, which is built on international law and UN resolutions. One of the few good things that came out of the Sharm El-Sheikh agreement was that the European Union and United Nations, which do believe in international law, were involved. They may be able to start injecting a correct framework into the peace process—one built on international law and UN resolutions.

I want to address my colleagues who say that they are friends of Israel. The international community must insist that Israel acts responsibly and respects the Geneva conventions. Israel has recently joined the group of western nations at the UN. However, that implies responsibility on the part of Israel to behave like a western nation and respect international law.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: Surely responsibility is a two-way process. We have heard a lot from my hon. Friend about what Israel has done. Does she have any criticisms of the Palestinian leadership's handling of these events?

Dr. Starkey: Clearly, criticisms exist on both sides—

Mr. Twigg: My hon. Friend has not aired those on the other side.

Dr. Starkey: They have been well aired by other hon. Members. I simply make the point that the Palestinian

[Dr. Starkey]

authority is not yet a recognised state. It is not in occupation of anybody else's land. Israel is in occupation of other territories, which it took by force. It would be a dangerous precedent if the international community were to turn a blind eye to the fact that Israel has acquired territories by force, is annexing those territories, is settling them illegally with its own citizens, and has expropriated huge quantities of Arab land in order to settle Jewish Israelis. Only Jewish Israelis are settled on that land. My hon. Friend will be aware that, even within Israel, the high court has only just been able to make the point that it is illegal for public funds to be used exclusively for the benefit of Jewish Israeli citizens. However, we have yet to see that high court ruling being put into effect, and Israeli Arabs being allowed to acquire homes within areas in Israel designated for Jewish settlement alone.

Israel is rightly proud of being the only democracy in the middle east. However, democracy is based not only on the will of the majority but on the rule of law and international law. In terms of respect for the rule of international law, Israel does not qualify as a democracy as most democracies would wish to do. Israel and the occupied territories are falling into an abyss. A deep corrosion has entered Israeli society as young people in the armed forces are being encouraged to have a casual disregard for the lives of Palestinians, which is carrying over into the treatment of Israeli Arab citizens. When Israeli Arabs in Galilee demonstrated against their Government, they were met with soldiers using live bullets. When Israelis of Jewish origin demonstrate and take vigilante action, in mob form, against Arab citizens, they are met with water cannons—

Mr. Stephen Twigg: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Dr. Starkey: No.

That is the appropriate way in which democracies control demonstrators—with the minimum of force. It is not to Israel's credit that the crowd control methods that it uses against Jewish Israeli citizens are different from those that it uses against Palestinian Arab citizens. That shows a casual disregard for the lives of Palestinians, which is corroding Israeli society deeply. That is a much greater danger to Israel, as a democracy in the middle east, than the supposed threat from outside. Britain has an obligation, as the former mandate power, to be much more active in trying to make Israel live up to its obligations under international law. The situation is so grave that we should press for a UN monitoring force on the ground between occupier and occupied. Only then can we start to rebuild the bridges—such as the Seeds programme that my hon. Friend the Member for Northfield mentioned—between Israel and Palestine, and construct a peace which delivers to both communities and, therefore, has a chance of lasting.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I shall call one more speaker, the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), and I shall ask him to speak for just two minutes because the Minister and the Opposition spokesman both need time to speak.

11 am

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I speak in this debate with a great sense of sadness. The debate in the House in recent years has not been about the basis of the peace process but about the pace of change and progress. It is sad that we are here today debating the current outbreak of violence. As a friend of Israel—I think that I speak on behalf of all friends of Israel in the House—I want to say that we remain totally committed to the concept of a just and lasting peace in the middle east. There is no doubt about that commitment from the point of view of those who proudly say that they are friends of the state of Israel.

I also speak as someone who is proud of having a multi-faith constituency, in which Jews, Christians and Muslims live alongside one another in an atmosphere of mutual respect, friendship and tolerance. I hope that every responsible Member of Parliament will join me in condemning those who would use this delicate situation in the middle east to whip up tensions between Muslims and Jews in Britain. Recent increases in anti-Semitic attacks do not reflect the mainstream views of Muslim people in this country. They are the actions of the fundamentalist few.

I also want briefly to mention the presentation of the current situation. Certain sections of the media—and, indeed, certain Members of Parliament—seem unable to view the situation objectively or with any sense of balance. I have not heard one person today say that it is unacceptable to sit at the negotiating table one day and, a day later, when one does not get what one wants, to turn to violence. I have heard hon. Members talk today about the historical grievances and the historical sources of tension and conflict between both sides. However, that is exactly why we have had a peace process that has made so much progress in the middle east in a relatively short period of time: to resolve that conflict and those tensions.

If we look at the chronology of events, it was at Camp David that the Prime Minister of Israel offered the best deal that has ever been offered in a peace negotiation between the Israelis and the Palestinians. When Yasser Arafat walked away from that negotiating table, he went to visit a variety of world leaders and tried to enlist their support for the fact that he had refused to make progress on that offer. Those world leaders made it crystal clear that they could not support his walking away from the negotiating table. That was when the violence began. I illustrated in my earlier intervention how that violence is not spontaneous, but orchestrated and encouraged. That does not mean that there are not strong feelings among the Palestinian people. One reason for the strong feelings is that those people have not seen a great improvement in their living standards as a consequence of the peace process. A primary reason for that is the misuse of foreign aid by the Palestinian authority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Mr. Savidge) spoke earlier of the tragic vision of a young Palestinian boy being killed. That will live in the memory of many people. So, however, will the lynching of the two Israeli soldiers and the brandishing of the hands, dripping with blood, from that window. That is why those of us who see both sides, and who try to have an objective perspective on the situation, reject the bias

and lack of objectivity with which this tragic and longstanding conflict is often presented by some hon. Members and by large sections of the media. We should focus on ending the current violence, initiating a period of reflection and trying to restore co-operation on the ground. It is to be hoped that we can then rebuild confidence, enabling both sides to return to a peace process that is the only way forward for Palestinians, Israelis and all who live in the region.

11.5 am

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): I congratulate the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) on securing the debate, the most powerful that we have had in Westminster Hall. Emotions have been forcefully expressed and I accept that all hon. Members have strong views on the matter.

I visited Jerusalem in June. I went there with no strong emotions and no attachment to any side of the argument. I went also from a new generation that did not have the student hang-ups—if I may put it that way—that featured in the debates that occurred decades ago. I saw two things that had a profound impact on me. First, the Israelis took me to the holocaust museum, where I saw things that made me cold and which have stayed in my mind for a long time. Secondly, the Palestinians took me into a refugee camp. I had not seen poverty in my life, in which I have been very lucky. What I saw in the camp, where I witnessed at first hand the conditions in which Palestinian children were living, had a profound impact. I learned then and have grown to understand why the emotions and anger that we have seen this morning are so strong.

The visit was also optimistic. Speaking to politicians on all sides, I felt that the peace process was making good progress. I would have predicted then that a deal could have been struck by Christmas of this year. The Camp David agreement in July had seen progress on many core issues, and it is right to acknowledge that President Barak had moved further than many people had said he would. But the problem then is the problem now: Jerusalem.

Two people who seemed to be a whisker away from peace six months ago are now separated by a gulf, as they are sucked regrettably towards the orthodox position in both camps. Since Camp David, things have fallen apart and it is frustrating that we cannot take and bank some of the agreements that were made. There was agreement on 70 to 80 per cent. of the issues, but that is now falling away. However, we are where we are. The attempt to obtain a ceasefire is in ruins and violence occurred again last night. There may be encouraging signs as the violence seems to be less intense and might be reducing, but it is alarming for all of us to see how quickly a peace process can unravel.

Some argue that the closer to peace that we come, the more violence will occur. They cite the example of South Africa and say that, as the peace process gets closer to a conclusion, the militants bed in and become harder. Such people suggest that we might be seeing merely the last throes of violence before peace is established. I doubt that. How many last chances can the region have? Israel's internal party politics will play a key role during the next 48 hours. Barak seeks a coalition and he is talking to Sharon. Obviously, that is not an issue in which the United Kingdom should become involved. Israel must decide how it governs itself. However, it would be regrettable if conditions were imposed to end the peace process as part of a coalition agreement.

It has also been suggested that Mr. Sharon is playing it tough in order to remain leader of his party. Some people say that his visit to the Temple Mount was more about internal party politics than the exercise of his religious rights. If that is true, it is to be regretted, but it is not helpful for me or others to participate in a blame culture, a little of which we have seen in today's debate. I shall not do so and I do not think that others should do so. The United Nations took great care to avoid mentioning individual names in its recent resolutions, although we must note that it condemned Israel's use of excessive force.

What are the steps forward and what should happen now? The language must change and the violence must stop. There is no chance for the time out proposed by President Barak. However, Palestinians must recognise that he has moved some way. He should be cautious about domestic deals that make a return to the peace table much harder and Israel should be open to allowing the international community to step in and consider the United Nations claims. The United Kingdom also has a role to play, working with its European Union partners. I hope that the Minister will set out his plans in that respect, especially as a gulf will be left when President Clinton ends his term in office next month.

We are not discussing a party-political issue. It is not about being pro-Arab or pro-Israeli, oil reserves or memories of the holocaust. It is about 14 and 15-year-old children throwing stones and 17 and 18-year-old soldiers retaliating. The grown-ups should become involved. Where are they at the moment? Deep down they must know that without a ceasefire there will be no progress, and that without progress there will be no peace.

11.10 am

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): I congratulate the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) on securing the debate. This has been a remarkable parliamentary occasion and the situation in the middle east has been aired from every possible point of view.

Recently, the world rejoiced at the disappearance of Milosevic in Serbia and at the return to democracy. Similarly, we have recently seen North Korea and South Korea come together. I welcome the re-establishment of diplomatic relations. Many good things have been happening in the world during the past few weeks, so events in the middle east seem all the more tragic and unwelcome, especially after seven years of painstaking and halting progress. It is very disappointing that Camp David was not a success.

As well as those in the region, British citizens have also been affected. Our Muslim minority has been affected by anti-social activity that has arisen from the problems. We have in Britain a long-standing and distinguished Jewish community that contributes richly to our national life. Events in the middle east have, therefore, come into Britain not only through the television screens in our living rooms, but in the mindless attack on the young Jewish student in north London and attacks on synagogues. British citizens

[Mr. Richard Spring]

have felt anxiety that derives directly from events occurring many miles away. I hope that in today's meeting, the president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews will receive assurances from the Home Secretary that protection will be provided for all British citizens and their religious buildings at this difficult time.

At Sharm El-Sheikh, President Clinton delivered to the press an address that set out the basis for the agreement. It is worth while to look back at that agreement. Of course, it called for an end to violence, but it also set out specific ways in which progress could be made. Disappointingly, that has not happened and the reality has been very different.

Before we consider the events and prospects in detail, I should pay tribute to the way in which Arab leaders have sought to calm down the situation. There is always a risk that anti-Israel protests will take on a momentum of their own and spill into domestic grievances. The role of King Abdullah and of President Mubarak in trying to stabilise the situation—a role that they have played with considerable statesmanship—deserves unstinting praise from the international community. I also welcome on behalf of the Opposition the visits made to the region by the Minister of State and, most latterly, the Foreign Secretary's attempts to be of direct help. Obviously, it is the United States that overwhelmingly influences the situation, but we in Britain have historic links to the region and ties of trade and friendship—a relationship that we value immensely.

Although Arab leaders in general are to be commended for their moderation and desire for a cessation of hostilities, that cannot be said of Saddam Hussein. He is a man who will seek to gain advantage for himself through any instability in the middle east. If violence continues, he may be tempted into some unwelcome actions. His confidence is growing as sanctions are, as the Minister knows all too well, being flouted by an increasing number of countries. That is a serious cause for concern.

Since the Oslo accords, Israel has boomed economically. It is at the forefront of biotechnology, communications and information technology. It is a considerable and admirable success story. However, juxtaposed against that is the fact that Palestine is absolutely and relatively poor. I greatly welcome the recent offer made by Arab countries, now richer on the back of the oil price, to give more aid. Young Palestinians in particular, their political passions inflamed, do not have anything like the same economic opportunities as their Israeli neighbours. In the longer run, it is fundamentally important that the question of the economic viability of the West Bank and Gaza be addressed. Two situations polarise the problem. The extent to which Chairman Arafat can control the situation on the ground is not clear, nor is the extent to which he can accept any son-of-Camp-David terms that may emerge in future. The violence will have given fresh support to Hammas in the south and Hezbollah in the north.

Yesterday, in the House of Commons, we elected a new Speaker by a rather arcane route and, in this mother of Parliaments, we saw how bizarre circumstances can arise. However, nothing in the House of Commons compares with the difficulties of trying to run a Government, even with a parliamentary majority, in the Knesset. Religious parties have a wholly disproportionate influence in that body. As we have seen on our television screens, specific events have inflamed the situation dramatically. Even Mr. Barak has described Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount thus:

> I cannot say that it was the most brilliant idea of the month.

Indeed. Terrible images of young people, including young boys, being shot and killed, haunt everyone who saw them. Similarly, the deaths of the two Israeli reservists in the police station in Ramallah tore at the emotions of the Israeli people. The catalogue of horror continues day by day.

For the moment, the drawbridge is effectively up, and there is fury and anger on both sides. However, it is imperative that the ceasefire should begin to take hold, as agreed at Sharm El-Sheikh. The Israelis have endorsed the ceasefire, and it is important to have the Israeli army's rules of engagement spelt out clearly. It is to be hoped that an enduring basis can be agreed for an impartial inquiry into what led to the tragic events of the past few weeks.

It has always been at the heart of British foreign policy that the state of Israel should be kept secure and independent, and that the Palestinians have the right to national self-determination in a viable political and economic entity. Much progress was made at Oslo. Israel withdrew from South Lebanon earlier this year. There is every hope that the new Syrian leader will come to an agreement with Israel about the Golan heights. There are still enormous hurdles to overcome, but there is no alternative to trying again when tempers have cooled. This is a small corner of the world which is precious to Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. Miracles have happened elsewhere in the world in resolving suspicion and hatred between peoples. I can only pray that the same also happens between Israelis and Palestinians.

11.18 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Peter Hain): I welcome the debate. The strong views that have been expressed here by well informed Members show the Chamber at its best. I also welcome the contribution from the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring), which was valuable in the current situation. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) for giving me the opportunity to express the Government's deep concern about the tragic situation in Israel and the occupied territories, and I agree with the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) that this presents an opportunity for the House to show that it is a friend of peace and to take that process forward.

I acknowledge the long-standing and expert interest in the problem taken by my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow. He has long been an eloquent advocate of the cause of the Palestinians. I agree with him—because it is factually self-evident—that the vast majority of those killed have been Palestinians. The latest estimates put the number of dead at more than 130, of whom at least 125 are Palestinians. The killing of Palestinian children has made the horror even worse. The lynching of two Israelis by Palestinians in Ramallah confirmed the bleak darkness that has shut out the peace process.

I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) and for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) that Israel must not be above international law. Indeed, with full United Kingdom support, on 7 October the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1322, which condemned the violence, especially the excessive use of Israeli force. It called for an end to all violence and the immediate resumption of peace negotiations.

My hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes, South-West and for Walthamstow, together with the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), asked whether Britain's role in the peace process could be greater. Before I deal with that question, I welcome the acknowledgment of the hon. Member for West Suffolk of the Foreign Secretary's hard work in the region between 11 and 13 October when, in an intensive round of contacts, he met President Mubarak of Egypt, President Assad of Syria and King Abdullah of Jordan. He met Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat twice and he also met the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan. I think that his work paved the way for the Sharm El-Sheikh summit. Last week in Cairo, I received a first-hand report about the summit from Egyptian Foreign Minister Moussa. It is important that we continue to engage in such a process.

The American presidential transition may provide an opportunity for the European Union, and Britain in particular, to continue to engage in the peace process. We have a unique friendly relationship with the Palestinian people, the Israeli Government and their people, the Americans and the Arab world, and can perhaps play a more prominent role in the process than we have been able to do. If we are asked to do so, we shall, but we can do so only with the consent of the other parties involved, including the Americans who have been in the lead up to the present time.

The hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) said that the Israeli Government under Prime Minister Barak had faced enormous internal difficulties. As an elected Prime Minister, he must take account of volatile public opinion, yet he has pushed forward the peace process. The hon. Gentleman was right to acknowledge that and to praise it. I caution him, however, against making a demand for aid to be cut to the Palestinians. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) made a similar point. Britain contributes about £25 million worth of aid to the Palestinians and will continue to do so. We shall not turn our back on them, especially at this time. It is vital that we continue to stand together with them and the Israeli people to find a way in which to bring them together in peace not conflict.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: I never suggested, nor do I believe, that aid should be withdrawn from the Palestinians. We should ensure, however, that that aid is used properly and not spent in a way that cannot be accounted for. It must directly benefit the Palestinian people.

Mr. Hain: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's clarification. I agree that there is far too much corruption within the Palestinian authorities.

I also agree with my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Hertsmere that there is a real danger of the conflict spreading. I felt that myself when I received a delegation of Muslim leaders at the Foreign Office last week. Indeed, the new leader of the Board of Deputies of British Jews said in her introductory statement at a reception last night that there is a real danger of the conflict spilling over into British society. Attacks have already been made on Jewish synagogues and Muslim citizens, and we do not want our community relations poisoned by the conflict spreading to this country. We must make efforts to ensure that it does not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northfield is another longstanding advocate of the Palestinian cause, and rightly so. He said that one of the really serious consequences of the conflict was the deaths of Israeli-Arab citizens and referred most movingly to the experience of his friend Asel. We must discourage such a development. The hon. Member for Guildford made the important point that, if reconstituted, the Israeli Government must not turn its back on the peace process. It is a matter for the Israeli people, and the Prime Minister is currently deciding who should be members of the Government. Whoever is a member of the reconstituted Israeli Government must be a friend of the peace process. Britain will stand firmly by that position.

Mrs. Ellman: Will my hon. Friend also assure us that he will make it clear to the Palestinian leaders that they should rejoin the peace process? Will he point out that they have breached one of the agreements of Oslo and the Wye accords by resorting to violence, rather than negotiating to resolve difficulties?

Mr. Hain: I am happy to say that I spoke to the Palestinian foreign spokesman, Nabil Shaath, this morning and urged the Palestinian leadership to re-engage with the peace process and make every effort to stop the violence. They should have made more effort to stop the violence than has been the case in recent weeks.

It is equally important to point out that Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian leadership also have a domestic constituency. It may not have elected them, but there is a strong feeling and a danger that the moderate leadership that he has driven forward will lose out to a much more hard-line and extreme opinion in the community, especially in the current situation.

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): In trying to discover the reasoning behind the violence, will my hon. Friend go so far as to accept that the British Government ought to back calls for an international inquiry? I had the misfortune to be in Gaza and the West Bank during the worst of the violence, and witnessed individual children being targeted with live rounds from the Israeli defence forces. On visiting a hospital in Gaza, I saw children who had been hit by dumdum bullets that had exploded inside their brains. Given my first-hand evidence, does he feel it necessary for the Government to call for an international inquiry so that we can find out where the violence came from and who was responsible for those deaths?

Mr. Hain: It is precisely because of the points raised by my hon. Friend that we support the decision of those who took part in the Sharm El-Sheikh summit to agree on an internationally based inquiry. There will be one as

[Mr. Hain]

a result of that summit. It was agreed to by all concerned, including the Israeli Government. No doubt the summit will deal with the matters he identified.

I should briefly tackle a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West about a United Nations force, as demanded at the Arab summit. I pay tribute to that summit for urging that the peace process be resumed, and showing a moderate leadership in difficult circumstances. I do not rule such a force out but it is difficult to put a UN peace-keeping force in the middle of warring parties, as we have seen in Sierra Leone, where there was a peace agreement, and can still see in the Congo.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South said that, as a friend of Israel, he was a friend of peace. Given the passions displayed this morning, it is important that we remember that the majority of Israeli citizens backed Prime Minister Barak in his seeking to resume the peace process. I am convinced that the majority still back a peace settlement, even after the events of the past few weeks.

It is a tragedy that the parties know how close they came to an agreement at Camp David. They were in reach of a deal that would have changed the face of the middle east. There is a contrast between what we have seen recently and what I saw on my visit at the end of August. Within a few hours, I spoke to Prime Minister Barak and President Arafat, and it was clear that they were close to a deal. Sometimes that is the most difficult time of a peace process, as we saw in Northern Ireland and South Africa in the early 1990s.

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): Will my hon. Friend the Minister give way?

Mr. Hain: No. I am sorry, but I do not have time.

The agreement would have led to the creation of an independent and viable Palestinian state with clearly defined and secure borders. It is inconceivable that any other route will lead to such an achievement, so the Palestinians must persevere on it. Further delays in the peace process will lead to the Palestinians being offered less than they have been. The Palestinians must realise that they will have no better partner for peace than Prime Minister Barak, and the Israelis must realise that they will have no credible partner for peace other than President Arafat. It is vital that they continue to work together for peace.

Only peace will enable the Palestinians to express fully their right to self-determination and enable the Israelis to enjoy the security that they rightly demand. Only peace will remove the instability and uncertainty that hangs over Israel. Once it has been achieved, the two peoples—who share not only land, but a history and a future—might realise that reconciliation and co-operation will achieve much more than conflict and confrontation. It is our responsibility, through patient diplomacy and constant engagement with all our friends in the region, to promote that peace settlement. We have had a lot of experience, and compromises will be needed, as in Northern Ireland and many other areas of the world, in order to secure that peace.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I congratulate hon. Members on an excellent debate on an important issue. The next debate will be initiated by the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley).

Child Abduction

11.30 am

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): This is a timely moment for a short debate on the Hague convention on international child abduction. First, child abduction beyond the boundaries of the country in which the child is normally resident is, regrettably, an increasing violation of human rights. That is because of greater ease of international travel, decisions made by a number of countries for different reasons to reduce border and passport controls, within the EU area for example, and, sadly, because the incidence of marriage break-up is rising rather than falling. That combination of factors tends to put an increasing number of children around the world at risk from the evil of child abduction.

Secondly, we are six months away from the quadrennial review of the Hague convention, which is due to take place next spring. It is a desirable to have a major debate in the House, and more widely in Britain among all those who are involved in trying to deal with the issue, on what stance should be taken by the British Government, fellow members of the European Union and other Governments who are signatories to the Hague convention before the convention meeting next spring.

As I am sure the Parliamentary Secretary is aware, there is widespread concern in the House about child abduction. In July, before the House rose for the summer recess, the all-party group on child abduction tabled early-day motion 980, which is headed "Review of the Hague convention on child abduction" and states that the House

> deeply regrets that some of the signatories to the Hague Convention on Child Abduction, including certain EU member states, fail to give effect to all of the Convention's provisions in some individual cases.

That motion had attracted a total of 118 signatures by the time the House rose last night, which indicates the width of concern, in all parties, on the matter. As the Parliamentary Secretary is aware, the officers of the all-party group followed up the early-day motion with our letter of 25 July to the Lord Chancellor, which drew his attention to our early-day motion and stated:

> we wish to urge that you as head of the Central Authority for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that Jim Wallace as head of the Central Authority for Scotland take early steps to consult with interested and expert parties, and most particularly with Reunite, the national charity for child abduction, on the improvements in the working of the Hague Convention that you both would wish to see being agreed at the Hague Convention review meeting next year.

That letter was sent on 25 July, and until a few minutes ago we were still waiting for a reply. Any reply before a debate such as this is better than none at all, but I would have preferred to have received it earlier than 10.47 this morning, on my fax. It was thrust into my hand by my secretary as I came quickly from the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs to this Chamber. The Lord Chancellor offered an apology that the delay was caused by an administrative failure in his Department. In any case, I should like to express my thanks that we have received a reply at the last moment. I shall refer to that reply in the course of my remarks.

On the consultation paper, to which we attach great importance, the reply states that there will be further consultation later in the autumn. The weeks and months before the spring meeting of the special commission are passing, and I hope that autumn will mean in a few weeks' time. It is imperative that hon. Members, Reunite and all specialist practitioners in all parts of the United Kingdom have a proper opportunity to make their own detailed consideration of the Government's proposals, and give their responses to the Government.

I want to make some detailed suggestions as to what we should try to achieve from the Hague convention review meeting next year. Before I do so, I turn to another aspect of international child abduction—abduction of young women, sometimes from this country, who are taken overseas for the purposes of a forced marriage abroad. I appreciate that it is a culturally sensitive matter and I applaud the Government, who, unlike any of their predecessors, have faced up to the issue and taken steps to produce policies that address the matter from a human rights standpoint. I applaud the Government for setting up the working group on forced marriage and, following the working group's report, the Government's response in their action plan, which, by and large, was thoroughly positive. I have one question for the Minister in that regard. Do the Government consider that the existing ambit of criminal law in relation to the removal of young women from the jurisdiction of this country for the purposes of a forced marriage overseas is satisfactory? On that key point, the Government's action plan, at paragraph 4.3, is somewhat ambiguous. It states that the Government will:

> Prepare detailed information for all our staff about the criminal law in the UK on abduction and how it applies in cases of forced marriage.

That does not make it clear whether the Government are satisfied with the current criminal law or believe that it should be strengthened. In particular, do the Government accept that adults who conspire, in the UK, to remove a young woman from the jurisdiction of this country to a country overseas for the purpose of a forced marriage would be guilty of a criminal offence in this country? I hope that the Government accept that it would be a criminal offence and I believe that that is the Government's position. If it is, are they satisfied that criminal law is sufficiently wide to ensure that it is a criminal offence for adults to conspire to send young women overseas for the purposes of entering into a forced marriage?

It is generally accepted that, whatever the imperfections in the operation of the Hague convention, there is no prospect–nor, perhaps, is it necessary–for amendments to be made to the text of the convention, but that there should be improved operation and enforcement of the convention under the present wording. At the Hague convention review next year we should seek to get agreement to a remit to the Hague secretariat to produce a series of codes of practice on key areas of the operation of the convention. That would represent a great step forward.

I hope that at the review meeting next year we will not simply provide a generalised remit to the Hague secretariat to produce codes of practice, but go further and specify the particular areas in the operation of the convention in which codes of practice are necessary. I would like to propose five such areas.

First, we need a code of practice on prevention of international child abduction. As we all know, prevention is infinitely preferable to the trauma of an abduction that actually takes place, both for the child involved and for the parents from whom the child or children are taken. Extremely valuable work has been carried out on prevention in the United Kingdom, not least by Reunite, the national child abduction charity, and I believe that this country would make a considerable input to any Hague secretariat code of practice.

Secondly, I hope that we can create a code of practice on embarkation controls and procedures. Once a child has been abducted, the only likely protection against that child being removed from the jurisdiction of the country in which he or she is normally resident will be at the port of embarkation—the airport, railway station, frontier point or sea port. Therefore it is essential that embarkation procedures and controls are in place rapidly to identify children who have been abducted. As I hope the Minister is aware, the all-party group is concerned about the reduction in embarkation controls that have taken place in this country, and believes that it exposes children abducted in this country to a significantly greater degree of risk.

Thirdly, I hope that there can be a code of practice on judicial training for judges dealing with Hague convention cases. All the experience to date shows that a specialist group of senior lawyers is needed properly to enforce the Hague convention. In this country, we have such a group of lawyers. The subject has always been treated as one for specialists here, and we have a group of judges who are familiar with the Hague convention and have expertise and experience in dealing with such cases. Sadly, in too many countries that task is simply left to the normal judicial hierarchy with the result that judges in lower courts may have to deal with Hague convention cases–probably for the first time in their professional careers. There have been many examples of individual judges treating Hague convention cases as custody decisions, when they should be dealing with the fundamental issue under articles 12 and 13 of the convention, which is the question of whether or not a child should be returned to the country of his or her habitual residence. That is the key judicial function for the purposes of the convention. We need better, more specialist training, and a code of practice would be desirable.

Fourthly, we need a code of practice providing guidance to new state parties. There are only about 50 state parties to the convention at the moment, but we hope that there will be many more over the next few years. We must give the new parties all possible help in implementing the convention from the outset to the highest standards.

Fifthly, I hope that we might have a code of practice on enforcing the access provisions of the Hague convention. The Hague convention is explicit about that; article 21 states clearly:

> The Central Authorities are bound by the obligations of co-operation which are set forth in Article 7 to promote the peaceful enjoyment of access rights and the fulfilment of any conditions to which the exercise of those rights may be subject. The Central Authorities shall take steps to remove, as far as possible, all obstacles to the exercise of such rights.

[Sir John Stanley]

Access rights are clearly enshrined in the convention and, sadly, in several cases, those rights are not being upheld. Catherine Meyer, in a case with which the Minister is familiar, has had only 24 hours of access to her children in Germany since they were abducted six years ago. That is a sad and deplorable state of affairs and points again to the need for a clear code of practice on operating article 21.

Finally, since sending our first letter to the Lord Chancellor in December last year, the all-party group has been pressing for a quantum leap in achievement from the review meeting of 2001, which will be the fourth such meeting. None of the three previous meetings has achieved anything in practical or concrete terms, although I am sure that they have been invaluable in enabling the participants to exchange views.

I am glad that the Lord Chancellor, in the letter that I received this morning, says that he believes that

> the Special Commission this time should look to achieve more than in the past, with a new focus on improving the operation of the Convention, and on making sure that the countries newly acceding to the Convention are in a position to live up to the requirements it imposes.

If that is to be the case, it is essential that Ministers attend the special review conference. I am glad that the Lord Chancellor is much more positive on the subject in his latest letter than he was in his previous letter of 1 March. He says:

> I agree that Ministerial attendance at the Special Commission could also be helpful, by raising its profile and providing more political impetus than it has had previously, and we have put this point to the Hague Secretariat.

I urge the Government to do their utmost to secure ministerial attendance; only if we get that attendance will we achieve a positive outcome on an issue of profound human rights importance. If the Minister, in her reply to this debate, can announce that there will be ministerial attendance, I know that that would be widely applauded as a helpful and important initiative by the British Government.

11.49 am

The Parliamentary Secretary of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) for initiating this Adjournment debate. As he rightly says, it is a timely opportunity to discuss child abduction and the preparations that we are making for the special commission in the Hague next year. Although this debate is less well attended than the previous one, it is no less important and will attract the same amount of attention outside this place. People will read carefully what the right hon. Gentleman said and my response to him.

The right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues in the all-party group on child abduction have already drawn the attention of the House to this important and sensitive issue through the early-day motion to which the right hon. Gentleman referred. The group does enormously valuable work in keeping the issue in the public eye and in supporting the work of Reunite, the international centre for child abduction. I was happy to attend and speak at the reception that the all-party group arranged for Reunite earlier this year.

I am also grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton (Mr. Olner), for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) and for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton), and the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) for having, in the terms that the right hon. Gentleman described, written on the subject just before the summer recess. I am sorry that the reply to that letter was delayed during the recess, and I sincerely apologise for that discourtesy, but I hope that the contents of the letter will at least have been worth waiting for. One advantage of the delay was that the reply could report on the common law judicial conference on international child custody, which took place in Washington last month and to which I shall refer later, if I have time.

I have read the reply from my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, which represents the views of the Foreign Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department. It is worth emphasising at the outset that our Departments work closely together on this important subject. Staff in the family policy division of the Lord Chancellor's Department and in the child abduction unit at the Official Solicitor's Office are in regular contact with their counterparts in the consular division of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The right hon. Gentleman asked several important questions, including whether the Government believe the existing ambit of criminal law to be satisfactory. Whether a criminal offence has been committed in a particular case must depend on the circumstances of the case. For example, it is a general rule of law that a conspiracy cannot exist between a husband and a wife, which clearly presents difficulties in this sensitive area. It is, therefore, not a prima facie criminal offence for parents to plan to take their children abroad, as millions do every year. However, I shall pass the right hon. Gentleman's comments on the matter to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who is responsible for developing criminal law and will be interested in them.

Forced marriages are an important subject and an increasingly recognised problem that we take seriously. We have promised to do all that we can to help victims of forced marriage. The Foreign Office and the Home Office have launched a joint plan to turn that promise into action. The plan sets out a comprehensive strategy on the overseas dimension of forced marriage. It launches a major programme of co-operation and training between key police forces in the United Kingdom and their counterparts overseas, and it reviews how our staff overseas handle victims of forced marriage from the moment they walk through the door to the time that they return to the UK.

The right hon. Gentleman makes the criticism that that does not go far enough. The plan calls for a joined-up approach in which we work together to give victims the support that they need, and envisages a partnership of the Government, communities, women's groups, the police and others, working together to help victims. The dozens of commitments amount to a genuine manifesto of practical action.

We have taken our cue from the Government's working group on forced marriage, which published its report last month. The group has done an outstanding job in breaking once and for all the taboo on discussing the subject. It endorses what my Home Office colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for the

Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), said when he set up the group. He commented that

cultural sensitivity is no excuse for moral blindness.

We take on board the right hon. Gentleman's point.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned embarkation controls. I am afraid that what I have to say will not satisfy his call. Currently, there are no formal embarkation controls to prevent child abduction. Our view is that formal controls would be disproportionately expensive. However, Government agencies are working with airports, seaports and carriers to increase awareness of the issue. We will obviously monitor the impact of improvements in the working practices of the organisations involved.

The right hon. Gentleman made an important point about judicial training. I agree that convention cases should be dealt with by judges who are familiar with the convention and the relevant legislation to ensure uniformity across the board. The permanent bureau in the Hague is currently developing an international child abduction database. The project is intended to provide wide access to case summaries and a full text of leading international child abduction cases, of which a significant proportion will be English, Welsh and Scottish. The Government are keen to promote wider dissemination of useful information in all areas of public interest. International child abduction is an especially important matter, in which the sharing of information should carry considerable benefit. I am pleased to say that as part of our commitment to the database, the United Kingdom has contributed £5,000 to the cost of INCADAT for 2000.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about ministerial attendance, in respect of which we have much sympathy with the view of the all-party group. It is not, however, a matter for the United Kingdom alone—a point that we must always bear in mind when dealing with this difficult and potentially intractable matter. If we are to be effective in making improvements to the operation of the convention, we need other member states to join us and to reach a consensus. So far, however, the Hague secretariat reports that other countries are not as enthusiastic as we are about the suggestion that Ministers should attend, although the secretariat is sympathetic. We will continue to work on the matter.

We want also to consider with the Hague secretariat and other member states the admission of new members to the convention. So far, the policy has always been to encourage everyone to join. We in Britain have changed our view about that, and I shall want to discuss the matter further at the special commission.

Sir John Stanley: Before the Minister finishes, will she tell us whether the British Government agree that it is highly desirable for the outcome of the Hague convention review to be a formal remit to the Hague secretariat to produce codes of practice in defined areas such as those that I have suggested and to which the Government may want to add? Is not that a desirable objective for the Government?

Jane Kennedy: It is clearly a desirable objective, and I confirm that we shall press for it. We would all agree that the 1980 Hague convention on child abduction was a positive and significant step forward in dealing with international child abduction. It is, however, by no means perfect and we have not reached the end of the road. As the right hon. Gentleman said, the increasing mobility of populations means that people who would probably never have met in the past are more and more likely to meet, form relationships, marry and have children. That is occurring across barriers not only of nationality, but of language, religion and culture. As we have heard, there can be difficulties, but there can also be advantages. The difficulties become especially acute if the relationship between parents breaks down. Children may end up with parents in different countries with different cultures and social expectations. Inevitably, for the parent with whom the children do not live, there is a temptation to take the children back to his or her own country or to keep them there after a visit.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. However important the debate is, time is up.

Fuel Duty (Rural Areas)

12 noon

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this important subject again.

A great deal has happened since my previous Adjournment debate on this topic, just before the Budget. I shall start by saying a few words about the events of the summer. I want to stress that the Government's attitude towards the fuel blockades over the summer was absolutely correct. It is not right for any section or interest group to try to use its economic muscle to blackmail a Government into a change of policy, especially when that policy affects not only that group but the great majority of the population. The Government were right to insist that they would not be pushed into any knee-jerk response while under such pressure.

Of course there is concern about the price of petrol and, within that, about the level of fuel taxation. However, the Government's response to these concerns should be properly thought out with an eye to the long term, and should be based on core principles. For a Labour Government, the most important principle underpinning taxation policy surely has to be a progressive one—that is, the principle that, whenever practical, taxation should bear less heavily on those least able to afford it.

When we apply that principle to petrol taxes, we find that in practice it is the low-income households in rural areas on which the burden of petrol tax is bearing down hard and disproportionately. In urban areas, the Government have a reasonable argument when they say that the operation of petrol tax is progressive in a rough-and-ready way. In such areas, low-income households tend not to have cars and therefore tend to be exempt. For example, in Glasgow, only about 34 per cent. of households have access to a car.

The same argument cannot be made about remote rural areas, however. I shall concentrate on my own constituency, because I am most familiar with that area, but colleagues will be able to draw their own parallels with other rural areas. In the Western Isles, for example, 62 per cent. of households have access to a car—twice the percentage of Glasgow, and higher even than the Scottish average of 57 per cent. Using a car in a place such as the Western Isles is not a luxury; it is a necessity for getting to work and to the shops, and for being able to lead a regular, ordinary life in the community.

In remote communities, car ownership is not related to income or wealth. Average incomes in the Western Isles are substantially—about 25 per cent.—below the national average. A remote community such as the Western Isles has substantially lower incomes than the national average but is substantially more dependent on private car transport. Logically, therefore, a flat rate of petrol tax must hit my constituents disproportionately hard.

I am not exaggerating the difficulty that this issue creates for my constituents. I checked this morning and the price of unleaded petrol in the Western Isles is 92.3p a litre—a price well above that which provoked the public outcry and the blockades on the mainland this summer. I know that petrol tax is not responsible for the phenomenally high prices in the Western Isles, but the Government cannot ignore the fact that petrol tax is part of that price; nor can they ignore the fact that petrol tax has a significant impact on rural communities.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): The hon. Gentleman is referring to private road users. Does he agree that the same applies to road haulage in rural areas such as his constituency and my own in Montgomeryshire where the only means by which to transport products to the shops is by way of road hauliers who tend to pay proportionately more for fuel?

Mr. Macdonald: Yes, haulage is affected by petrol tax, too. The further that one is from the main trading centres in Britain and Europe, the greater the impact.

Aspects of unfairness in the tax system sometimes can be tolerated when the tax concerned is relatively minor and when it would either be too cumbersome or expensive to make it more progressive. However, as a tax increases and its impact on low-income households becomes greater, any unfairness becomes less acceptable. That is the key problem with petrol taxation. When petrol tax was relatively small, it could be argued that the cost of adjusting it to make it fairer was disproportionate to the improvement in fairness that would be achieved. All that has changed because of the impact of the fuel escalator that was introduced by the Tory Government. The present Government abolished the escalator, and I warmly welcomed that, but its legacy lives on. Petrol tax has risen, mostly under the Tories. It was a relatively small tax, but it is now one of the higher taxes operated by the Treasury. It raises £22 billion a year, making it the fourth highest tax after income tax, value added tax and corporation tax.

Petrol tax needs to be reformed. I do not believe that it is wrong in principle. On the contrary, I accept that there are strong environmental arguments for petrol taxation. It is important for the Government to have a range of taxes to fund their public services. However, petrol tax needs to be reformed because its size has so increased that it demands our making a serious effort to make it more progressive in its impact on remote areas. We shall never make it completely fair, but we can try to make it fairer, and that is what the Government should now be examining.

The solution would be to provide a rebate in vehicle excise duty for motorists living in remote rural areas. For example, a rebate of about £100 in excise duty for the island communities in Scotland would cost £3 million or £4 million. That is a modest sum compared with the £22 billion collected by the tax, but one that would go a long way towards signalling the Government's sensitivity to the matter of fairness.

There are arguments against such a targeted solution. First, the Automobile Association has argued that my solution would be unfair because well-off people in remote areas would benefit while some vulnerable groups in urban areas would still be affected. The fact is that any solution can only make the tax more fair, but not perfectly fair. We accept the rough edges in the case of value added tax exemptions on food and children's clothes, given that rich and poor alike benefit from them. That is similar to the Government's new policy on

television licences for the elderly as a result of which rich and poor pensioners alike will benefit. The impact of petrol taxation in remote rural areas is so clearly regressive that a solution directed at those areas can be justified as it will result in substantially improving the overall fairness of the tax.

The second argument against my solution is that it would be difficult to draw or to justify the geographic boundaries that would receive the reduction in vehicle excise duty and those that would fall outside such areas. Such an argument would have some validity if broad swathes of rural Britain were to be included. However, I am not suggesting that. If a vehicle excise duty reduction were confined to genuinely remote areas where the problem was at its most acute, the difficultly would not be insurmountable. The geographic boundaries of remote island communities are certainly obvious to the naked eye and I believe that such a solution would be widely acceptable.

In the case of the Scottish islands, there is a precedent of which the Treasury is aware—the reduction in vehicle excise tax payable on heavy goods vehicles on particular islands. The logic of that targeted reduction for lorries should now be extended to cars.

I believe that the objections to a targeted approach can be answered. The technical obstacles to a targeted reduction in vehicle excise duty that is intended to balance the disproportionate impact of petrol tax on remote communities can be overcome. I grant that a targeted solution has some residual awkwardness and that the Treasury tends to shy away from such measures. In defence, however, I plead the essential residual awkwardness of the geography of the country in which we live. It would be good if Britain were a nice, convenient square shape such as that of France, Germany or Spain. Unfortunately, however, Britain is not shaped like that. It is long and narrow. Most of the population is situated at one end of the country and there are only scattered communities at the other end, on the outer fringes of Europe.

I am not blaming the Treasury for the shape of Britain, but it can be held responsible for policies that ignore the social and economic realities that are dictated by geography. That is why I urge the Government to take those realities into account in framing their fiscal policy during the coming months.

12.11 pm

Mr. David Stewart (Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber): First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) for initiating this and previous debates on the subject under discussion I should like also to thank my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary for agreeing to make a brief contribution.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles, I represent a very rural constituency. It is the largest Labour seat in the United Kingdom and stretches from the Atlantic to the North sea. Obviously, the community in this large, spread-out rural area is dependent on cars. The constituency contains a number of island communities, which are a special consideration in this debate. They include Rhum, Eigg, Muck and Canna. For more than a decade, fuel prices have been an issue in my and many other rural constituencies. As the price of fuel approaches £4 a gallon, the problem is becoming more acute. I can safely say that the matter is now the No. 1 issue in my constituency, narrowly beating the Child Support Agency into No. 2, although there is not much in it.

As my hon. Friend said, the car is not a luxury in rural areas. My constituency has a very high car ownership, so increases in fuel duty hit low-paid motorists and essential users especially hard. Rural hauliers in particular have been badly hit. During the past three years, I have approached the issue in a number of ways. I have raised it at Prime Minister's Question Time, initiated Adjournment debates and participated in a number of meetings, not least with my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary but also with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, along with some other rural Back-Benchers. I have also met those on the other side of the equation: the key companies. I have met the chief executives of British Petroleum, Shell, Esso and Texaco, which was useful in gaining understanding of the issue and have encouraged many of my constituents, not least rural hauliers, to make some contributions to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which is discussing the issue as we speak.

Of course, there are many critics of the level of fuel duty. At present, I think that all the tax and duty adds up to around 72 per cent. of the pump price. Ironically, with all the recent uproar, the proportion has fallen since the previous Government were in power, when it was around 78 per cent. of the pump price. As we heard earlier, the Tories invented the fuel escalator, which the Chancellor has now abolished.

We must be careful not to make false comparisons with other European countries on taxes. For instance, Britain does not have motorway tolls and tends to have lower corporation and direct taxes. Of course, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries has played an important role in the equation. By restricting output—some other political games are going on, especially with Iraq—the spot price of fuel has gone from around $10 a barrel to around $36 a barrel, which is a gigantic increase. Of the last 19p worth of price increases during the past 16 months, which was a big jump, duty contributed only 2p. We must therefore be careful when discussing this equation. OPEC raises much wider issues, such as globalisation, the level of control that individual Governments can have, and what pressure they can bring to bear on OPEC. I am not convinced that the American strategy of releasing the strategic petroleum reserves is the answer. Given the current high petrol prices, I also believe that now is the time to put more pressure on our oil companies to start exploring in a new fields and utilising the existing fields. More than 300 so-called fallow fields in the UK continental shelf are not being developed at all.

What is the future? The easy answer is a cut in fuel duty. A 2p reduction, for example, would cost the Treasury more than £1 billion in revenue. However, the Chancellor also has a responsibility for economic stability. In his reply, will the Minister answer the criticism, which I hear in my constituency, that the Government have made record VAT returns because of the high price of fuel? I would be grateful for his thoughts..

Is there an answer? I would say yes. First, we need a fairness charter to target concessions aimed at lower-income motorists. We must keep the freeze on liquefied

[Mr. David Stewart]

petroleum gas—LPG—which is an excellent environmentally correct fuel and only a third of the price of conventional fuel. We should introduce an essential users' allowance for rural hauliers, which would be similar to that for the bus industry. There should be further reductions in road tax for fuel efficient vehicles and a road tax reduction for those in rural areas, as my hon. Friend said. Finally, we need a fuel regulatory set-up that monitors prices across the country, as I have no doubt that there is exploitation of the so-called soft market, especially in rural areas. I thank my hon. Friend for initiating this debate.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. Has the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) had the permission of the initiator of the debate to speak? If so, I hope that he will be brief and allow the Minister sufficient time to reply.

12.17 pm

Mr. Maclennan: It is very much in the interests of all hon. Members that we receive a reply from the Minister. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) for the opportunity to say that, in the highlands and islands, this matter does not divide political parties. There is a common perception that the issue is one of social justice, and that if there is a will there will be a way to deal with the gross disparities of petrol prices between sparsely populated remote areas and densely populated urban areas, where totally different considerations apply.

It is easy but mistaken to suggest that an alteration of petrol taxation affecting those areas would send the wrong signals about the environmental commitment of the party making the adjustment. Adjustments of the kind proposed by the hon. Member for Western Isles would have no material impact on the environment. It should be recognised as primarily a matter of social justice. The variation of taxes in our country to take account of wholly different circumstances is not only theoretically but demonstrably possible, as it has been done even in countries of a different geographical shape from our own. Even a square country such as France has varied petrol duty to take account of the problems of insularity and remoteness. That has been held to conform with the rules of the European Union, not to speak of variations that have taken place in other comparable parts of northern Europe.

I wholly endorse the views expressed by the hon. Member for Western Isles and regard the matter as a test case for the Government to demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and to recognise that their employment initiatives can be set at nought if they do not tackle this problem in the Budget statement.

12.20 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) on securing this debate. I know that what he and others have said reflects genuine concern in their constituencies.

I was interested to hear the comments made by all three speakers, and I was also surprised to note the absence of any representatives of the Scottish National party in this debate, because they have spoken a great deal about these matters. However, they have clearly chosen to leave it to others to raise them in this Chamber. I also want to say how much I agree with my hon. Friend's opening remarks about the Government's response to the blockades last month. He was absolutely right to make those points.

I want to repeat the assurances given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that we understand the deep concern over high fuel prices expressed in today's debate. I spend a great deal of time meeting and listening to road hauliers, petroleum retailers and others who have been particularly affected by the recent price increases. However, I want to emphasise the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart), that the recent price increases are not the result of fuel duty. The Budget in March this year saw no real-terms increase in either petrol or diesel duty, and none of the price increases since March has been a consequence of fuel duty either.

The Government have had to make some tough choices over the past three and a half years. Those choices have delivered unprecedented economic stability, benefiting all parts of the United Kingdom. We have cut the deficit, put the public finances back on track, and converted a £27 billion deficit at the time of the election into an £18 billion debt repayment last year. Those provisions have led to very significant gains for the country in terms of the record low unemployment figures announced last week.

Furthermore, because we have been successful in reducing debt and cutting unemployment, we have been able to allocate money that would have gone in debt charges and unemployment benefits to improvements in public services. That will produce important benefits for rural areas over the next few years. Those are the changes that we were elected to deliver, and we are now delivering them—not despite the decisions that we have made on taxation, but because of them. We are now determined to reap the benefits of those tough choices. That means no irresponsible lurches on tax policy and no other reckless moves that some hon. Members—not in this Chamber but elsewhere—have proposed, which would jeopardise the new stability in the economy which is so important for all our futures.

The increases in fuel duties in recent years have produced a number of important benefits. They have given motorists and manufacturers clear incentives to design more fuel-efficient vehicles and to limit unnecessary journeys. The increases have also played a significant part in putting the United Kingdom on track to meet our Kyoto commitments. It has been estimated that real-terms increases in fuel duties between 1996 and 1999 will produce CO_2 savings of between 1 million and 2.5 million tonnes a year by 2010. That is a significant contribution towards meeting the Kyoto objectives,

which I think that everyone here would support. We have also successfully used duty incentives to improve local air quality. We have significantly reduced the sulphur content in fuels, which has produced widespread benefits.

My hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles proposed a measure relating to vehicle excise duty. We are sensitive to the concerns that he and others have raised. I shall briefly outline the steps that we have already taken on vehicle excise duty, which has already been cut for smaller cars. We introduced a lower annual rate of £100 for cars with engines of up to 1,000 cc, which was a £55 cut benefiting 1.8 million small cars. In this year's Budget, we announced that, from next March, that reduced rate will be extended to apply to all existing cars with engines up to 1,200 cc. That will bring in another 2.2 million cars, making a total of 4 million cars that will benefit from a lower rate. That will provide an incentive for motorists to make their next second-hand car purchase a smaller and more environmentally friendly model. Many of those about whom my hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles expresses concern—I am not referring to those for whom a car is a luxury, but those on modest incomes for whom it is essential to have a car—will benefit from next March from the lower rate that we have introduced, if they have a smaller car.

In addition, also from next March, the vehicle excise duty for new cars will depend on the level of CO_2 emissions that the engines of those cars produce. Under the scheme, up to £70 less tax will be charged on 95 per cent. of new cars, and the lower the level of emissions, the lower the rate of duty. The new arrangements will encourage people to buy new cars as opposed to old, and cars with a lower level of CO_2 emissions and better fuel efficiency. It is no surprise that the changes that we made in Budget 2000—although that may seem a long time ago now—were warmly welcomed by the press and motoring organisations.

Travel difficulties can be acute in rural areas for particular groups of people, and it is important that we take account in this debate of those unable to use a car, of whom there are quite a number in my hon. Friend's constituency and in other rural areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles referred to the high price of petrol in the Western Isles. He will know that there has been a recent investigation of the pricing of fuel in the highlands and islands, which concluded that:

> there is no evidence of any general problem of excessive pricing or profits.

The investigation came to a different conclusion about the Western Isles, making the point that:

> it cannot be concluded that the market in the Western Isles is working competitively. Prices are higher than elsewhere and this cannot be explained in terms of lower volumes or by what we currently know about costs.

The Competition Commission will therefore undertake further work on the issues raised by the Western Isles.

My hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles proposed a reduced rate of vehicle excise duty for motorists in rural areas. The proposal is interesting and merits serious consideration, but it could carry significant risks of fraud, and difficult questions of practicality and fairness would have to be answered as well. Would the measure assist the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber? If it were targeted only on islands, very few of my hon. Friends' constituents would benefit. It would be difficult to decide who would qualify for the reduction. The existing concession for lorries up to 12 tonnes applies only to lorries that do not travel to the mainland or travel on specified journeys to and from the mainland. I am not sure whether my hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles would envisage that restriction applying to his proposal too; it would be much harder to apply to cars. I am well aware of the concerns being expressed and am interested in what he proposes, but I do not want him to think that the measure could be introduced quickly, even if it were decided that it was worth while.

Briefly, I refer to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber about VAT. Of course, people may be spending more on fuel, but they are spending less on other things. Broadly speaking, therefore, the receipts on VAT are not exceptionally different from those that were expected at the Budget.

I am grateful to my hon. Friends and to the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) for expressing their concerns and those of their constituents. I have no doubt that we shall return to these matters both before and after the forthcoming pre-Budget report, whose date of publication is likely to be announced later today in a written answer to a parliamentary question.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We have run out of time and we now move on the last of this morning's debates in Westminster Hall, which will be initiated by the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George).

Telecommunication Cable (Cornwall)

12.30 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I am delighted to have secured this important debate, and I am pleased to be here with a Minister who was so persuaded by my arguments last time we were in the Chamber debating the subject that he put down his notes and spoke without his brief so as to respond to my specific points. I hope to persuade him with my arguments again today so that he is encouraged once more to speak without his brief. I contacted his office to give a clear indication of the line of questioning and I hope that that was helpful. I am sure that the Minister knows that the regulation of cable companies in Cornwall is a serious issue and that the special circumstances that apply there should be properly understood and appreciated.

Many people who know me will be surprised to see my name associated with a debate about anything to do with the internet and information technology. If I am not the most IT-challenged Member of Parliament, I must at least be one of the most challenged in the House and, therefore, the world. Despite that obvious handicap, I shall continue, as we must discuss important issues that relate not to use and understanding of the internet but to the practicalities of laying cables in an area such as Cornwall where transatlantic communications cables are being laid.

I want to bring to the Minister's attention the impact of what I consider to be the lax regulation on people, their livelihoods and the environment of west Cornwall. I shall speak about the lessons learnt about the regulatory framework surrounding the laying of telecommunications infrastructure and make a case for updating it. I had hoped to raise the matter sooner, as important developments have occurred this year. I refer especially to cable landing stations. Those large aircraft-hangar-style developments have been initiated in the middle of sensitive landscapes. Many of them will cover some 2,500 sq m, and we expect more. Despite all that has occurred in west Cornwall, I do not think that to introduce tougher measures now we would be to shut the stable door after the horse has bolted. Our experience so far is not the end of the road and there is further development to come.

First, we need to understand what fibre optic cables are. As I understand it, such cables carry laser light signals for long distances and provide a quick and high-quality means of sending internet communications. Now they are available in multicolour form. I understand that up to 100 colours are available, each of which can provide a different stream of information. During the past five years, eight companies have brought transatlantic cables to the Cornish coast, which is the most economically attractive place for such development. On each occasion, the local community was given scant notice and suffered a lot of disruption. People's lives and businesses were often blighted and the environment also suffered through the rutting of country lanes, and so on.

Not just cables but landing stations are needed to transfer data streams between transatlantic cables and on-land cables, and they need a controlled environment for multiplex trackers and various other voodoo-sounding things that I do not understand, but which I imagine to be important to the technology.

During the past three years I have written 20 or 30 letters to Ministers in the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to raise issues on behalf of constituents who are extremely troubled about the fact that local authorities are pretty powerless to influence the way in which such companies operate. I had a meeting with the then Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills), in February last year. Fortunately, he accepted that there were problems and agreed to approach some of the companies to ask them to stage an exhibition in the local community to demonstrate the benefits of the technology for the community. It was a cunning ploy on my part, as I knew that there were no benefits for the local community because the fibre optics went straight out of Cornwall to other areas and that local businesses were being disadvantaged, not advantaged, as a result. I shall return to that point in a moment.

I also asked the Minister to contact all licence holders under the Telecommunications Act 1984 to ask them to find ways of co-operating in future. Rather than company after company disrupting our lives in west Cornwall, they should be forced—or, rather, encouraged, as nothing is specified in regulations to force them to do—to co-operate and bring their cables through together, in shared multiducts. The Minister honourably wrote to all licence holders in March last year. It was a nice letter, but he could use only the art of persuasion and not regulation, and it has made not a jot of difference to how the local community has suffered.

The problems experienced are not limited to obvious disruption for people using what is often the only route out of their village to the nearest town. They include long delays, sometimes in the middle of summer; long queues and unacceptable disruption to people's lives, to businesses and to people coming to the area on holiday; damage to the road surface, as I experienced when on a bicycle recently, and an increase in the number of manhole covers. According to the highways department at Cornwall county council, in some areas the road is in a serious state of deterioration. That blights businesses and communities. In addition, the Wildlife Trust tells me that, where cables are laid off the road in sensitive habitats that are not sites of special scientific interest, companies are not compelled to reinstate the environment.

Cable landing stations are a blight on a sensitive landscape and seriously compromise planning regulations. In all other circumstances, we would not allow development such as we have seen in west Penwith. Furthermore, development is piecemeal. We do not know what will happen next. Another cable company may come, or it may not. Ten may come. We are obliged to accept that. No strategy or structure is involved. Development is virtually unregulated.

What benefits does such development bring? In responding, DTI Ministers have constantly emphasised that the intention is to make the United Kingdom the best place in the world to engage in e-commerce, and we should all applaud and work towards that. For Cornwall, however, there is precious little benefit. The fibre optic cables go to switching stations up country, and we have no access to the fibre optic technology ourselves. In that respect, we have all the pain and none

of the gain. Indeed, many small, vital information technology businesses, some of which have relocated to the area and some of which have grown in the area, are now at a commercial disadvantage because they send pictures and designs on copper wires, and are therefore much slower than their competitors who have access to fibre optic technology.

Why is that happening in west Cornwall? Companies are landing their transatlantic cables on the coast of Cornwall, not sending them to London or elsewhere, because such action lowers the cost, lessens the risks of broken signals and maximises technological efficiency.

What benefit does this bring to Cornwall? Some people in my area answer that question by saying, "Sweet fibre optics." The scales of natural justice are tipped so far in favour of the cable companies that it makes the situation absurd. It costs £700 million to lay a transatlantic cable. We think that we are doing well in Cornwall because we have objective 1 status and that will give us about £300 million over seven years. We consider that that is a bonanza and we want to make a difference to the future economy of Cornwall with that money. Given that it costs £700 million to bring a cable across the Atlantic, the amount of money that it costs to install cable stations and lay the cables along our roads is chicken feed to the companies involved. It is a multi-billion pound industry, but it is not regulated or enforced to pay any compensation to the local community for the fact that it is disrupting lives.

What regulations exist? From my conversations and correspondence with Ministers in both Departments, it is clear that we are probably talking about deregulations not regulations. The Telecommunications Act 1984 provides companies with a licence. It is a licence for them to do pretty well what they want to do over a 25-year period. Companies need to give the local council only 28 days' notice if they want to dig up the road. In most cases, that is all the notice that they do give. There is precious little that the local authorities can do even about reinstatement. They can force the companies, but sometimes that is difficult if the reinstatement is not up to an adequate standard.

The New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 contains some planning regulations, but few. Planning policy guidance notes 8 and 12, the Town and Country Planning Order 1995 and circular 1/97 are all relevant, but they do not seem to have made an impact on the planning side of the technologies and developments. I accept that they have resulted in an amount of stone facing and scantle slate roofing of the structures in some cases, but the regulations do not deal with the size of the structures and the fact that they are genuinely alien to the landscape. In the past, local authorities used to work alongside the electricity, gas and water boards. I know that that is regarded as a joke by many hon. Members, who think that one board dug up a road one day, while another board carried out some work a week later. However, at that time local authorities felt that they had some control over such matters. Now they have no control.

An urgent review of the regulatory framework is needed to give local authorities the teeth to reduce disruption and damage, and enable them to protect the environment. Moreover, they must be able to insist on compensation commensurate with the damage done. I appreciate that the Government are expected to ensure regulatory stability by both European and our standards, and that the industry expects regulatory stability, but what about community stability and the economic stability of small businesses in rural areas? What about landscape stability and the integrity of planning stability? Much could be done about that.

The Government need to consider several options, including giving local authorities greater notice and allowing them to have more say in such matters. Local authorities must be able to insist on routing being carried out elsewhere along motorways and railways. They could require the companies to pay a fee or provide a bond to the local authority that is held until it is satisfied that the road has been adequately reinstated. They should insist that cable companies have single windows of opportunity to lay their cables and that they should use those windows to lay a substantial number of cables. The terms and conditions on which excess cables are sold or leased should then be negotiated. An occupation charge should be levied for the use of the highway, to encourage those who are laying the cables to do their job quickly and not to hang around. There should be penalties for companies that do not comply with the regulations. Perhaps the Government should consider charging the internet equivalent of a barrelage charge in places such as Cornwall, where we have to suffer the landing stations as well as disruption to our lives.

When I asked for this debate, I received calls from a number of companies with interests in mobile phones asking me not to raise questions about masts. I shall not do so, but if I had the opportunity to do so, I would say that they, too, need planning—I got that one in as well, after all.

It is difficult to predict the future of the technology. The Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), wrote to me in November 1998, when she was a DTI Minister, in response to an issue that I raised with her. She said that she saw my concern as something of a temporary problem. She thought that it would be resolved in a few years and said:

> it is unlikely that it will bring a rash of new companies.

Hardly had the letter appeared on my desk when a rash of new companies arrived.

We do not know what will happen in future, but we do know that we are talking about a multi-billion-pound industry. It is important, and we want to support it, but we also know that people's lives and livelihoods are blighted, that the planning system and landscape are compromised and that we can see only pain and very little gain in a place such as Cornwall. The Cornish economy and internet businesses are being disadvantaged as other areas and businesses benefit. A local organisation called Digital Peninsula is currently making proposals on behalf of 100 small companies in the area, which constantly tell me about the problems caused by their obvious disadvantage.

People in my area believe that the scales of natural justice have tipped so far in the companies' favour that the situation has become almost absurd and the scales have almost fallen over. They believe that the regulatory framework has failed to keep pace with technology and commercial developments and needs to be updated after

[Mr. Andrew George]

the enactment of the Telecommunications Act 1984. It is now time for the Government to take action and urgently to review the regulations.

12.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George), but I am afraid that I shall stick fairly closely to my brief as I am probably as IT challenged as he is. In fact, I am challenged by almost all forms of technology beyond the bicycle.

The hon. Gentleman has raised an important matter that I recognise to be a cause of great concern among many of his constituents. He did so reasonably and cogently. I appreciate that work by telecommunications operators has caused disruption not only in Cornwall, but elsewhere. However, a number of factors in Cornwall mean that such works can have a greater impact there. Those include narrow lanes, proximity to the Atlantic and the various other factors about which the hon. Gentleman spoke.

The recent growth in international communications traffic is a reflection of the United Kingdom's success. The modern broadband networks that are now under construction are vital to meeting our target of making the United Kingdom one of the best places in the world to do business electronically. I must challenge one point made by the hon. Gentleman in that respect. He seemed to suggest that Cornwall would not benefit from these developments. That is not quite right. Although Cornwall may be slow to benefit from competition in modern telecommunications development, it will do so in due course. Some benefits have already been provided, and in future there will be big benefits for Cornwall and the rest of the country. Cornwall county council is a member of the South West Grid for Learning, which has secured Department for Education and Employment standards fund money. In the first phase of the project it is planned that 31 secondary schools will be broadband connected by March 2001. It is also planned to link libraries and primary schools into the network in the near future. Those are definite benefits to Cornwall. Developments in information and communications technology offer a real opportunity for peripheral and rural economies such as Cornwall to overcome some of the disadvantages of location and the scale of local labour markets.

The information society is a theme of the objective 1 programme. It is early days yet, but the indications are that several projects are expected to come forward for increasing the number of businesses utilising e-commerce and improving the ICT infrastructure within the county. Those should all ultimately benefit Cornwall's economy.

Pressure for more development will continue and we believe that the key to avoiding or minimising disruption from street works and other development lies in a combination of measures. The planning system is one of the tools available. Local authorities are not completely powerless, a point that I shall touch on in a minute. National and local planning policies play an important role in respect of many mast developments and cable landing stations, but other measures also contribute to controlling cable-laying activity.

A modern network brings many social and economic benefits, but it is essential that the drive to develop the industry is balanced against environmental objectives. Planning policy guidance note 8, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, is the relevant document. In particular it emphasises the need for telecommunications development to take place in a way that keeps the environmental impact to a minimum.

Under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995, licensed telecommunications code system operators have the right to lay cables without the need to make an application for planning permission. However, a prior approval procedure applies to cable laying in areas such as national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty, conservation areas and sites of special scientific interest. I imagine that the hon. Gentleman has a number of those in his constituency. In those areas the local planning authority can refuse approval where it considers the development will pose a serious threat to amenities.

The powers granted to telecommunication operators by the DTI enable companies to lay cables in public streets without the need for separate licences from local highway authorities, but those rights come with obligations.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: I want to give the hon. Member for St. Ives a full answer and he left me only 12 minutes in which to do so. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I shall carry on.

Licences contain conditions designed to reduce disruption from street works activity. For example, licences require operators to explore the possibility of duct sharing in order to reduce unnecessary digging. Where practicable they are expected to install sufficient ducting for future growth in demand, so reducing the need for further street works and wherever feasible to install ducting in footpaths rather than the road, to minimise traffic disruption. I recognise that some of the roads the hon. Gentleman described do not have footpaths. I am familiar with Cornwall.

In view of growing concerns about the impact of cabling activity the Government have reminded operators of their licence obligations and we have urged them to do all that they can to minimise the disruption arising from the construction of new networks. We shall continue to do so and I take the opportunity to repeat that message today.

I am sorry to hear that this has not had much impact. There is one rather more practical measure that may be of interest to the hon. Gentleman and his constituents. Street works carried out by licensed telecommunications operators are subject to the controls contained in the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991. Except in the case of protected streets, where street works may be executed only with the consent of the street authority, the Act does not allow authorities to refuse undertakers permission to carry out street works if they have a statutory right to do so. But it is not a free for all: undertakers—utilities and others with apparatus in the street—must reinstate road surfaces. They must give the required notice of forthcoming works and they must co-operate with each other and the street authorities.

For their part the authorities must co-ordinate their own and undertakers' works. Further powers in the Act are aimed at controlling the time spent on street works and at minimising disruption. Undertakers, whether in the telecommunications industry or other fields, have statutory rights to carry out street works as part of providing the public with services that are regarded as essential in a modern society. On the other hand, road users and local residents are rightly entitled to the minimum disruption from those necessary activities.

For some years now, the liberalisation of the telecommunications market and the resulting growth in the number of excavations has given rise to increasing concern about the consequent disruption to traffic. There has been some consensus that there may be a need to tighten controls. Accordingly, we consulted on ways of countering traffic disruption caused by street works, and announced our intention to implement section 74 of the 1991 Act, which allows charging for contractors who overstay. Provided that Parliament approves the section 74 regulations that we intend to lay before the end of this year, they will be brought into force early next year. We will also introduce guidance on best practice on street works. I hope that that will provide a little comfort for the hon. Gentleman. Additional controls may be needed, and we shall carry out an early review of the effectiveness of the existing ones, including the section 74 regulations. In that context, the Government have tabled amendments to the Transport Bill in another place, as a reserve measure to allow highway authorities to charge undertakers for street works from the first day of works—so-called lane rental. That, too, meets one of the points made by the hon. Gentleman in the concluding section of his speech.

I am aware of concerns about the insensitive siting of cable landing stations. Licensed telecoms code system operators are permitted, subject to certain conditions and exceptions, to install, alter or replace any telecommunications apparatus. However, cable landing stations normally consist of buildings—large and, in some cases, inappropriate buildings—which are specifically excluded from the definition of telecommunications apparatus. Developers proposing to install such a building will therefore need to apply for planning permission. I assume that all those to which the hon. Gentleman referred applied for local planning permission. Local authorities therefore have some influence on the siting and construction of such buildings.

Where planning applications are submitted for telecommunications development, it will normally be for the local planning authority to determine the application. The starting point in that process will be the development plan. The Cornwall structure plan includes a policy that provides for telecommunications development in ways that will maximise the use of existing sites to limit the impact on the landscape. Local plans can contain more detailed policies such as the emerging Penwith local plan, which provides detailed locational and environmental guidance.

Penwith district council has also recently published supplementary planning guidance on "Cable Stations and Associated Development". The guidance makes clear that the council believes that there are few if any sites where landscape needs can be fully addressed by further development of the kind that has taken place up to now. For that reason, the guidance introduces more stringent criteria. We are pleased that the council is seeking to provide a more detailed framework against which planning applications for cable landing stations in Penwith can be assessed.

Mr. George: I appreciate that my intervention must be brief. Will the Minister or his Department issue guidance on the use of obligations under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, especially in relation to achieving some form of compensation from companies for the disturbance and blight on the landscape that has been described?

Mr. Mullin: I cannot comment on that at the moment. It is one of a number of practical suggestions that the hon. Gentleman has made, which I shall consider. Under the section 74 measures that I mentioned, it will be possible, where companies overstay, for a hefty charge to apply.

Telecommunications development is vital to the success of the British economy. The benefits are accruing now and will continue long into the future. However, the Government fully acknowledge the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for St. Ives about the localised but often significant disruption that such development can cause. Cornwall will benefit from the new technology, and, as far as future development is concerned, we want to make various changes—I referred to some—to the regulatory regimes within which the industry operates. In addition to introducing overstay and lane rental charging, we are consulting on revised planning guidance and we are prepared to consider licensing controls. The Government are willing to consider any new ideas to tackle what I acknowledge is a serious problem.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 25 October 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Flooding (East Sussex)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I am extremely grateful to have secured time for a debate on a matter of great importance to many of my constituents. I should, perhaps, particularly thank the previous Speaker, Betty Boothroyd, who allocated this time as one of her last acts in the Chair.

The flooding that hit Lewes on 12 October will have been seen on television news bulletins by many Members. The flood water came suddenly and rose quickly, submerging whole areas of Lewes and making the town unrecognisable. Within hours, 400 homes had to be evacuated and the main commercial area of the town had been wrecked. Some streets, such as Morris road in the Cliffe area and Spences lane in Malling, still look like war zones. In those places, contaminated water ran up to 12 ft deep, submerging not only the ground floors of dwellings but penetrating the upper floors as well.

I pay tribute to the work of the emergency services, especially the fire service, which was superb, as was the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Members may have seen footage of institution workers rescuing people from their homes in boats. It is a tribute to the emergency services that no one died in the floods and very few were injured.

I thank and express my admiration for Lewes district council, which has, in football vernacular, played a blinder. Within a couple of hours, emergency rest centres were established so that no one from the 400 evacuated houses went without food or shelter. In the hours and days that followed, the council issued regular updates to local residents, which were posted through every door in the town, arranged for mass clearances of flood-damaged goods, handed out mops, buckets and detergents and even provided disposable cameras to help residents with insurance claims. It also arranged for a free bus to the supermarket in Newhaven, given that the two in Lewes were unavoidably closed. I also acknowledge the sound contribution made by county council social services staff in helping victims of the floods when they were at their most vulnerable. The co-ordination with the district council's housing team was both impressive and reassuring.

The people of Lewes have also responded with real community spirit. Within a day, the number of bed spaces offered by Lewes residents to those temporarily made homeless was greater than the number of homeless people. I could mention many individuals, but I shall pick out three names. First, Superintendent Simon Parr masterminded police operations on the ground with a commitment and professionalism that inspired confidence in others. Secondly, Lewes district council's chief executive, John Crawford, handled the immediate aftermath with great efficiency. Thirdly, my Liberal Democrat colleague, Maureen Messer, chairman of the council, single-handedly fed and secured shelter for dozens of people in the Malling area when it was cut off from the rest of Lewes on that first night.

The response of the authorities and the people of Lewes made a real difference and kept up morale. The floods have brought people together; I am told that neighbours who have not talked to each other for years have been seen helping each other out, and I hope that that will continue. That is the good news. However, none of that can compensate for the fact that a terrible disaster has hit Lewes. Indeed, such is the scale of damage and devastation that I believe it is right to call the flooding a national disaster.

I am grateful to the Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, for taking the trouble to visit the town so soon after the floods occurred. In fact, I am surprised that he got through the traffic and the water. Perhaps he knows a secret way into Lewes of which I am unaware. His visit was very welcome. I was also pleased to receive his letter of 17 October, letting me know that, rightly, he had asked the Environment Agency for a full report of the incident, and promising me a copy of it. I was grateful, too, for Prince Edward's visit to the town on Tuesday last week. The visits underline the fact that what happened was a national disaster. Under such circumstances, it will not surprise the Minister to learn that I am here today to ask for national help to put Lewes back on its feet.

I referred to the superb local work of the public authorities; they could not have done more. However, the fact remains that the district council in particular is running up a huge bill because it has to house hundreds of homeless people, some of whom might be in that position for six months. Their houses will have to be completely stripped and replastered. The massive clearance work is also costing the council a great deal of money, and many other calls are being made on it besides that. I therefore unshamedly ask the Minister for some cash to help my town.

First, will the Minister give me an assurance that the district council will qualify for significant financial help under the Bellwin scheme? I know that he is sympathetic to the case, but I should be grateful if he confirmed that for the record and said how much money will be forthcoming. I hope that the Bellwin scheme will enable the majority of extra costs that will be incurred to be met, although there is some doubt about that. For example, I understand that the county council's insurance policy stipulates an excess of £105,000 per building. A number of its buildings have been damaged significantly. One building, in particular—the Phoenix centre—might cost more than £500,000 to put right, so it is clearly inadequate that the Bellwin scheme offers compensation of only £100 per building. Will the Minister comment on that point and, if my information is correct, ensure that the figure is updated in order to deal with the situation in Lewes? Otherwise, the public authority will be hundreds of thousands of pounds out of pocket simply because of what has happened to its buildings.

Secondly, the Minister will be aware that Lewes is a beautiful historic town—although he may not have thought so when he last visited it. It is recognised as one

[Mr. Norman Baker]

of the 50 towns in the country that deserves special protection. I regret that there has been significant damage to its historic core and the listed buildings therein. Will the Minister press his colleagues in the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to identify what funding could assist the problem? Perhaps such funding could come from English Heritage.

Thirdly, I shall refer to insurance claims. The Minister might say that that is a matter for individuals, but I shall try to melt his heart a little. Sadly, many people affected were uninsured. Such people are often the poorest in the community—pensioners who are living on nothing but the basic state pension and cannot afford the insurance premiums. All that they had was wiped out in a matter of hours or, in some cases, minutes. They left their houses in the morning to go the shops and returned to find them wrecked. That is difficult for any individual, let alone those who might be vulnerable. Some people have been left with only a shell of an uninhabitable building, and without a home for six months. It is bad enough when people aged 75 or 80 lose everything they have, but when they have no idea whether their homes can be replaced, the situation is even worse. The flooding is not only a tragedy for the town, but has resulted in a series of individual tragedies. People have been adversely affected and they need help.

I applaud the action of the mayor, Jim Daly, and the chairman of the district council, Maureen Messer, who have set up a fund to help the people who have been hit so badly. I am pleased to say that contributions are already flowing in from the public. Will the Minister pledge that the Government will either contribute to that fund or find a creative way in which to raise funds to help those people?

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I do not represent a Sussex constituency, but my constituency suffered flooding on 15 September when 65 mm of rain fell in fewer than eight hours. It was interesting that my hon. Friend did not mention the actions of Southern Water when he thanked people for their help. What will the Minister do about Southern Water's attitude? Several people in my constituency were either under-insured or not insured. If the Minister is considering contributions to hardship funds, will he look sympathetically at the fund that has been set up in Portsmouth?

Is my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) pleased with the reaction of Southern Water? I am far from pleased with its reaction to what happened in Portsmouth. It is failing to honour the Office of Water Services' guaranteed standard scheme for people affected by sewage flooding. It is not even honouring that basic commitment. I wish also to ask my hon. Friend—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's intervention has been too long.

Mr. Baker: There are legitimate questions about Southern Water, on which I will touch later. To pick up my hon. Friend's point about compensation, it is not enough for the Minister to tell me that people can apply to the social fund, because applicants sometimes have to demonstrate that they can pay back the money. Some people now have no money at all with which to pay anything back and the problem requires a different solution than might normally be offered.

The fourth matter that I draw to the Minister's attention is the catastrophic impact of the floods on business. Some businesses have told me that they have lost seven-figure sums; that is not an exaggeration. A great number are still far from being able to trade. There were only two shops open on Cliffe high street in Lewes on Monday, which is the last time that I checked. That is terrible. Sussex Enterprise tells me that it estimates that the loss to business in Lewes may be as high as £3 million per day.

The district council has responded positively to that unprecedented situation by announcing what is called a business-rate holiday for affected businesses. Will the Minister undertake to lobby his Treasury colleagues to give businesses a respite—not in terms of money, because businesses must be insured, but by extending the deadlines for both VAT and tax returns? Many businesses lost all their paperwork in the floods, which came upon them very suddenly, and it will take a long time to reconstruct that work. It will add insult to injury if the Inland Revenue then penalises them for not returning their tax returns on time. Perhaps the Minister will write to me on that if he cannot give me an answer today.

Fifthly, I need to draw to the Minister's attention the plight of the local farming community. He will know only too well from his role at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the problems that farmers everywhere face. Local farmers needed a flood like they needed an aperture in the cranium. Many fields in my constituency are still under water and crop loss is not insurable.

It is interesting that the south-east regional chairman of the National Farmers Union, John Robinson, who happens to be one of my constituents at Iford, wrote to the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), two days before the floods, warning of the impact that rain had had, even at that time, on production levels and hence productivity. Sadly, the post-flood position for Mr. Robinson and many farmers in my constituency is much worse. What will the Government do to help farmers in my constituency whose fields are still covered with water?

The Minister will be pleased that I have no further requests for money, but I wish to raise other issues, which I hope he will agree are legitimate. The first is on the state of flood defences in the area. I make a serious accusation in that regard. The Government were told about the inadequacies of flood defences in East Sussex but did not do much about it. The Environment Agency told them two years ago. The Agriculture Committee told them shortly afterwards—I believe that the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith), who has a neighbouring constituency, will pick up that point.

I told the Government about the inadequacies in two separate debates on flooding: on 24 February 1999 and in a debate that I opened on 16 June 1999. In the February debate, I told the House:

I am...concerned about the banks of the Ouse in Lewes. According to the Environment Agency, there is a real danger that the banks will collapse, with all sorts of consequences for properties, business and tourism in the county town.—[*Official Report*, 24 February 1999; Vol. 326, c. 341.]

In the June debate, I told the House:

The Environment Agency has identified work which needs to be undertaken urgently and has warned that if it is not done the river walls are at risk of collapsing.—[*Official Report*, 16 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 535.]

I shall show the Minister the front page of my local paper, the *Sussex Express*, on 30 January 1998. The headline reads, "No cash to hold back the Ouse". The first paragraph of that story, written two years before the floods, states:

Shocked Environment Agency officials have been told that there is no money in the kitty to carry out desperately needed work in Lewes to shore up the brick walls holding back the River Ouse as it passes through the town. The Agency was planning to start vital flood protection work, costing £2.5m, this year. But...cuts in funding means the scheme has had to be dropped for the time being.

I do not blame the Government for the terrible floods that we have had. The rainfall in the hours prior to the flooding was extraordinary. I am also not suggesting that, had the identified flood protection works been carried out, there would not have been considerable damage to the county town. There would have been damage—but there would have been less. Climate change is doubtless partly to blame; I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) will refer to that. By and large, the river walls in Lewes held good, so although the works identified would have had an effect, they would not have stopped the floods entirely.

In spite of the warnings that the Government have received, flood defence moneys have been cut from £320 million five years ago to £301 million this year. Those figures are quoted from *The Sunday Times*.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): Not always reliable.

Mr. Baker: No, the papers are not always reliable, but I would be pleased to hear the Minister correct those figures if he wants to.

The Environment Agency maintains that flood defence work in Sussex alone is underfunded by £4 million a year. However, a more serious issue is legislation relating to flood defence responsibilities. The Minister may recall that I raised the subject on the Floor of the House in the two debates to which I referred, and the Agriculture Committee reported on it at length. The problem is that there are many bodies with powers, but none with responsibilities. Such passive legislation does not work. In Lewes, a flooding problem could be a matter for the Environment Agency, Southern Water, the county council, the district council, the Crown Estates, the riparian owner or a combination of them all. That is a recipe for inaction and buck-passing.

To make matters worse, the Environment Agency identifies works that need to be undertaken and it is then up to flood defence committees to authorise them—or, all too frequently, not to do so. Those committees have the budget but they do not have the expertise, and many county councils want to spend the money on other matters. That mix—a professional body identifying the work but not having a budget, and people without the professional expertise or commitment to the work having the budget—must be changed.

We need two changes. The Government need to bite the bullet and increase significantly the money earmarked for flood defence work, irrespective of the figures of which I am sure the Minister will inform me. The climate is changing and the increasing incidence of floods will heighten, so the Government's increase for that aspect of their expenditure must be above inflation if they are to keep even the present situation at bay.

Responsibilities must be clarified. A lead body, probably the Environment Agency, should have a duty, not a power, to ensure that flood defences are adequate. We need to ensure that the body responsible for identifying problems and their solutions has the responsibility to fund them. That means either that flood defence committees should be abolished and their budgets handed to the Environment Agency, or that the Environment Agency should become a direct agency of those committees for flood defence purposes. The present hotch-potch cannot be allowed to continue any longer. It is intolerable that the Environment Agency should identify works in my town as essential but that they should go unfunded for years. Will the Government sort out the mess, or must we wait for another flood before they do so?

So far as strategic issues are concerned, it is clear that there must be an overall assessment of the river structure, from the Uck in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Wealden, through Lewes and to Newhaven. I have seen no evidence of such consideration of the rivers. I hope that the Minister can tell me that it will happen, and that the works identified will be properly funded and carried out.

Finally, some planning issues must be tackled. In 1960, there was a serious flood in Lewes. It was not as bad as the recent one, but bad enough to flood large areas of the town. Why were houses built shortly afterwards in areas known to be vulnerable to flooding, with predictable consequences? Does the Minister share my alarm at the fact that two of the first buildings to be knocked out of operation in Lewes were the headquarters of the fire brigade and the ambulance service? Clearly, they were not built in appropriate locations.

The district council's excellent director of planning, Lindsay Frost, is struggling to meet a Government target of 4,600 new homes in the district between 1991 and 2011. Given the restrictions that apply, whether natural, such as hills, or man-made, such as designated areas of outstanding natural beauty, it is almost inevitable that some of those homes will be earmarked for flood-plain areas. Those areas are often in line with Government guidance—they are often brown-field sites or on the edge of town, for example. I understand that the Environment Agency has made no objection to the specific sites identified in flood-plain areas, subject to measures such as increased floor levels that would not have prevented houses in those areas from flooding. Five planning applications are pending in the Lewes district for new buildings on the flood plain. What does the Minister suggest that the council should do with them?

[Mr. Baker]

This subject has arisen suddenly. I do not want to pretend that, with a crystal ball, we could all have foreseen such planning problems. However, building on the flood plain is a serious issue. The countryside will be under pressure if homes are not built on the flood plain. The Government need to make a clear statement on the issue.

To summarise, I have two main points. First, the scale of the disaster to hit Lewes is such that it needs financial and other help from central Government. The town is doing a great deal itself, but it cannot do everything. Will such help be forthcoming? Secondly, the Government need to acknowledge that legislation relating to flood defence responsibilities is in a mess and needs to be sorted out, and that more money needs to be found for flood defences. Does the Minister accept that?

I thank hon. Members for allowing me the time to raise this issue, which is of major importance to my constituents, and I look forward to the Minister's reply.

9.50 am

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): I commend the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on the timeliness of this debate, so soon after the House has returned after the recess. His comments, to which I am sure the Minister listened with care, about the need for funding in the devastated communities will receive widespread support.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the floods that occurred the week before last in East Sussex and parts of Kent, such as Lamberhurst, had a devastating effect on many local communities. In my constituency, the River Rother overflowed its banks at Bodiam, submerging the National Trust shop and tea room, while further upstream at Etchingham, the railway station, the church and at least three homes were flooded. However, the damage at Robertsbridge, which lies between those two villages, was by far the most severe and extensive. Almost 100 properties in Robertsbridge—on Northbridge street and Rutley close, part of the high street and Station road, including the nearby, newish village hall—were deluged. The water rose to more than 3 ft deep in some houses, and occupants were helpless to do more than move what belongings they could upstairs.

Last week I visited two such constituents, Alan and Sue Winspear, who had been away during the flood itself, but whose home, Quaker house in Northbridge street, is one of several whose back gardens follow the course of a stream that, in normal circumstances, is little more than a large, overgrown ditch containing a trickle of water. Last Christmas, the Winspears, like many other people in Robertsbridge, saw that stream become a torrent that advanced across their back gardens, and there were floods again in May, but none of the previous water havoc compared with the disaster of the week before last. Parked cars were ruined; as the hon. Member for Lewes said, business premises were engulfed; and homes were contaminated by the dark slime and sludge that the floodwaters left behind as they receded.

Afterwards, the sand bags and the skips full of ruined carpets and wrecked household goods told only part of the story. Inside many people's homes, floors, skirting, walls, curtains, kitchen equipment and heavy furniture were irreparably damaged. Afterwards, the clean-up got under way, as residents showed their resilience after the worst flood in living memory. Insurance claims are being processed for those who had insurance cover, but, as the hon. Member for Lewes said, many people, especially poorer people, do not have insurance cover, and they face terrible problems. The cost of the floods will be enormous.

There has been widespread praise, to which I add my congratulations and thanks, for the efforts of the police, fire crews and medical and other emergency services, including many local authority staff and volunteers who rescued the stranded, helped the elderly and set up evacuation centres. However, in spite of the exemplary behaviour of many people in the face of adversity, the Environment Agency urgently needs to answer many questions. It has been asked to produce a report for the Minister, and the House will be grateful for the Minister's prompt reaction to the disaster. The people of Robertsbridge and, I am sure, many others in East Sussex and Kent want answers, too, as the House will appreciate.

The area flood defence manager, who is based at Addington in Kent, has said that the level of the floods was so far in excess of what existing flood maps show—in some cases several metres above previous highest recorded levels—that it will take some time before a complete picture can be constructed. The area flood defence manager acknowledges the need to hold a public meeting in Robertsbridge, but anxious residents are in no mood to be left waiting for the answers that they want without delay. They want much more than the list of flood warnings issued in the Robertsbridge area and a recital of the common-sense flood advice guide that was on offer, which was the gist of the information faxed to me from Addington in reply to my first inquiries.

Many local residents are convinced that the opening and closing of the tidal sluice gates near Rye affected water levels upstream on the Rother, at Robertsbridge. Last Christmas, when those gates were opened, the water levels at Robertsbridge subsided rapidly and noticeably. What effect did those gates have on this occasion? Other residents are understandably suspicious that the Robertsbridge bypass, which was constructed over the nearby flood plain outside the village, now acts as a dam, diverting the flow of floodwater. The residents of Northbridge street are angry that a plan to erect a flood defence wall and divert the stream behind their houses, which was first proposed five or six years ago, was dropped, apparently because it was too expensive.

The Environment Agency should convene a public meeting in Robertsbridge at the earliest opportunity—I hope that the Minister will encourage officials in the agency to do so—so that they can answer these and other key questions fully and openly. The agency must demonstrate to worried local residents, who are reeling from the recent damage to their properties, that, as far as possible, the forces of nature will be matched and contained in the most effective way possible before floods again hit East Sussex.

9.56 am

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on seizing the opportunity for this debate. We consulted each other in

order to take a joint initiative, and as the people of Lewes have suffered more than those in other areas, I am pleased that he has succeeded in obtaining the prime position and that we now have more time to discuss the matter. I shall concentrate my comments on Uckfield, which has suffered flooding on several occasions, although I do not want to minimise the impact of the heavy rains that affected many homes, roads and businesses in rural areas but did not receive the same publicity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) made it clear that the flooding of the town was serious for many homes, but owing to the topography much of the damage occurred in the villages. To the north of Uckfield is the high Weald, which rises to 700 or 800 ft. It receives heavy rainfall, which causes little streams, some of which flow into the River Medway, which stretches towards Maidstone. The River Rother to the east and other streams running south affect Uckfield and continue downhill all the way to Lewes. Topography plays an important part in the problem.

The storm that hit us recently cannot be described as a freak because we might have other, similar ones. Recent rainfall seems to have been heavier than we are used to. The recent attack was particularly savage because the rain clouds seemed to remain above us instead of moving on. Normally, they move on and after a few hours the weather improves, but that was not so during the few hours of the recent burst, when some 80 mm of rain fell. No authority could anticipate such a storm or have remedies to minimise the effect—and we understand that.

Before I consider in detail some difficulties associated with the problem, I want to pay my own tribute to the men and women of the public services, who arrived quickly, dealt with the flooding and cleared up the mess so effectively. However, although few homes in Uckfield itself were flooded, the downtown area of the high street and the industrial estate were badly affected. Many small businesses were flooded—some for the second time in a matter of months. In retrospect, one might argue that the flood plain that existed before the industrial estate was built might have coped with the overflow from the River Uck, but I doubt it. In any case, we must accept that the industrial estate has created a great deal of wealth and many jobs, and has attracted a number of well known international companies. It would be the height of folly to assume that the problem cannot be solved; it can, and I shall deal with the matter later.

The problem of farms was mentioned by the hon. Member for Lewes. On my travels, I noticed that some crops still needed harvesting. Crops that were drilled prior to the floods are either under water or have been washed away. Other crops were harvested, and the land is waiting to be drilled. If land set aside for corn, for example, is not drilled now, the corn either cannot be planted at all or will be planted late, and crop quality will prove insufficient. In addition, cattle have been marooned. The impact of the flooding on dairy farming is bad enough without farmers having to cope with that as well. Many fields of spring rape, linseed and flax have gone. A constituent of mine has lost some 40 acres of flax, and stands to lose £11,000 to £12,000. Another farmer has lost 10,000 chickens.

Such problems have badly affected farmers at a particularly serious time for the British farming industry, and we must return to the question of compensation. I do not want to dwell on the subject, but there is a need for compensation and we must tackle it. As one farmer said, losses are extensive and damaging. It is not a question of insurance: one simply cannot insure against some of the problems that farmers face. If insurance companies will not deal with those problems, are we to leave farmers to face the consequences of such a storm? I hope that we can agree that a positive view must be taken on the extent of compensation.

The National Farmers Union has argued that there is a strong case for applying for outstanding agrimoney, and I believe that such payments commence from 16 October. I should be grateful if the Minister responded to that request. I pay tribute to him for his prompt appearance on the scene in Lewes and in my constituency. It is clear that he understands the seriousness of the problem.

Not only farmers were affected. As has been pointed out, given that the situation is clearly exceptional, communities themselves should do something, and the mayor of Uckfield has set up a fund to which we can subscribe. It is tragic that small businesses have had their stock destroyed by floods for a second time. It is quite pathetic to see such debris and mess on those premises. Will the Minister take into account the plight of small businesses that are uninsurable or cannot afford insurance?

The traumatic effect is profound. I should not like people to assume that we must admit defeat and that nothing can be done. Extending our sympathy to those who have suffered is simply not good enough. Sympathy will neither help deal with the flooding nor address the circumstances that gave rise to it in the first place. A fatalistic shrug of the shoulders will not ensure safety. If nothing is done, there will be more devastation and we will find ourselves debating the same problem again. We cannot and should not walk away from that problem. We are proud of our community in Uckfield. It is a prosperous town; we want to keep it that way, and we can.

I have touched on the issue of compensation, which the hon. Member for Lewes covered in some detail. We must grasp that nettle; it will not go away. Clearly, Government funds are not inexhaustible, but I hope that the Minister will confirm that compensation is not ruled out. The NFU estimates damage of some £3 million.

I should like to focus on the extent to which we can protect the community in my constituency from such serious effects in future. As the Minister will recall, there is a mill about 100 yds from one side of the high street, in front of which is the usual mill pond. It fills up too easily, the water rises and the outlet to take the water downriver is insufficient. That problem must be tackled; it is not necessarily too expensive to do so.

Water under the high street bridge rises quickly and can disappear quickly—it caused the damage in the high street and to the industrial estate to which I referred. To those of us who have studied the matter, it seems that the flow of the water under the bridge is held up too much, so it backs up. That situation, together with that of the mill pond, alerts us to the fact that, if the risk of further

[Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith]

serious flooding is to be reduced, we should consider the gradual removal of the ineffective ways in which water is conducted downstream—for example, by improving the flow under the high street bridge and the other bridge by the bypass. We should also consider replacing the old-fashioned, hard-engineered constraints in some of our rivers—the Uck, for example, has several—with environmentally sustainable alternatives. That matter was raised in the Agriculture Committee's report.

The rains were so heavy prior to the final downpour and flooding that the flood plains were already saturated. However, that should not lead us to believe that the flood plains will be of no use in future. We could make better use of them if they were better drained. I live nowhere near a flood plain, but on the morning when the flood was at its height after 88 mm of rain had fallen, my lawn—which is about 100 ft above sea level—looked as though it had turned into a lake. That is because the storm had been preceded by two or three weeks of heavy rainfall. We should not automatically assume that that will happen next time; we are often concerned with flash floods. The flood plains need to be properly managed, which I believe is possible. They were already wide open to flooding—having being saturated by rain before the heavy downpour during the few days before the flooding—and therefore unable to carry out their role.

I come to the question of housing. A few houses in Uckfield were built further and further down the slope towards the flood plain, and some were badly affected. We must face the fact that, in the light of the demand to build more houses, Wealden district council is seriously worried about where to site such dwellings. If one went south of Uckfield, one would probably face a greater flooding risk, yet we are told that we must address the need to build more homes. East Sussex had a programme to build up to 33,000 homes by 2016. The ill-fated Crowe report said that we could do better than that, and that we should have 45,000. The Government have split the difference. Anyone in East Sussex knows that it would be fatal to try to develop housing on that scale.

Of course, there are wider problems than that of flooding: there is the transport question, and the fact that more and more people are now drifting into the south-east. I do not want to introduce a suggestion of NIMBY-ism. The issue has nothing to do with "Not in my back yard". It has to do with the fact that we are seriously overcrowded, which puts enormous pressure on our resources—financial and otherwise—and our hospitals, roads and so on. We must examine the problem of where to build the houses if we are to play our role as responsible people and not put them in areas that we know will flood.

Several points were made in the Agriculture Committee report, some of which have already been raised by the hon. Member for Lewes. I could quote from many pages in it, but will not. However, there is no doubt in my mind after reading it that we need to reorganise the system or take some initiatives—not necessarily leading to a fundamental reorganisation—to clarify who is responsible for what. The report states:

> We are firmly convinced that the functions of Local Flood Defence Committees and Internal Drainage Boards would be more appropriately discharged by Regional Flood Defence Committees, which should be responsible for the delivery of all inland flood defence policy nationally working under the guidance and supervision of the Environment Agency.

I should like to know to what extent that view is accepted by the Ministry, and what action is being taken.

There is also the question of funding. It is often said that if we cannot manage locally, we always look to the Government as Father Christmas to sort us out. The Select Committee report clearly states:

> We believe a higher proportion of—
>
> regional—
>
> funding should be provided from central Government, which need not necessarily involve higher expenditure: indeed, it might provide some savings though reducing the convoluted bureaucracy of the current financing system.

The hon. Member for Lewes referred to that system, so I shall not explore the matter further. That leads me to several further recommendations, but, looking at the clock, I know that it will not please hon. Members if I go into too much detail on those points.

The report goes on to recommend that

> a clear presumption should be made against future development in flood plain land where the flooding risk attached to a particular development, as determined by the Environment Agency, is deemed to outweigh the benefits. In such cases, the Agency should intervene at all stages of the planning process in such a way as to deter inappropriate development, including, where necessary, referring the matter to the Secretary of State for his or her determination.

I will not dwell on that any further as I have already referred to the problems of the flood plains.

The report goes on to deal with the dissemination of information to the public and acceptance of flood and erosion risk. There is little doubt that if people were made more aware of the risk to either their businesses or homes they could take some responsibility for their actions. The report also refers to reducing long-term downstream flooding and erosion risk. It is perfectly true that we could get the water flowing through much more quickly, but if it flows through too quickly it only makes things much more difficult down river and for the people of Lewes. That is why the management of streams is so important before pressure can be applied downstream where the river widens. Does the Minister agree with another recommendation that, in addition to the funding mechanism, which should be reviewed, guidance should be given on the question of flood-plains and the other issues that I have raised?

One could continue, but I should just like to thank the Minister for the close attention that he has paid to the problem. I have not covered everything in the report and there is no question of trying to apportion blame in any way, but we need to know to what extent progress has been made, not only in accepting the recommendations on paper, but putting them into action. If we do not, I am afraid that, as the hon. Member for Lewes said, we shall be back in a couple of years' time going over this ground again.

10.17 am

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): The coastal area of my constituency was flooded a couple of years ago, and the experience of Lewes is not dissimilar to the experience of Chichester in 1994. The question now is

not whether Chichester will again have an experience similar to Lewes, but when. I am concerned that we will face a repetition of the 1994 experience unless the Chichester flood relief scheme that was developed after those events is rapidly implemented. This year, the water levels are very high, and Peter Midgley, the Sussex area manager for the development agency, has said that the situation is worrying. We are at trigger flood levels now, and we may be on a knife edge for much of this winter.

I discussed the matter with the Minister in August. He is always extremely courteous and approachable and he always makes himself available. I am grateful to him for that—I only hope that his gentle, kind and friendly manner is not too much in evidence behind the scenes, in the corridors of power where decisions are made on how much money is to be made available. I notice a slight firming of his physiognomy as I say that, which suggests that there is grit behind the openness and friendliness that I encountered when I came to discuss these issues with him.

The need to address a short-term problem is not the sole issue: as hon. Members have pointed out, the whole system of funding flood relief needs urgent review. An extraordinary mix of responsibilities are held by district councils, county councils and the flood defence committee, which embodies three authorities—East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton; the Environment Agency plays a crucial role; several Government Departments also have important roles to play; and all that interacts with the planning process. It is a hugely complicated and cumbersome set of arrangements. I strongly agree with the Agriculture Committee, which concluded:

> We therefore urge the Government after proper consultation with operating authorities radically to simplify the existing funding procedures for flood and coastal defence activities, with the aim of achieving measurable improvements in policy efficiency through cutting out unnecessary bureaucracy and administration.

That is the nub of the matter. We have all experienced the complications. We would like the Government to act as soon as possible, and a much-needed review is already under way.

I conclude by asking the Minister four questions. First, can he give my constituents an assurance that, if it is needed, central Government funding will be available to ensure that there is no delay in the implementation of the Chichester flood relief scheme, which is due in time to protect us next winter? I sincerely hope that this winter will be the last in which Chichester occupies the precarious position wherein it could all too easily face the same events as Lewes has experienced.

Secondly, will the Minister give urgent attention to the need for extra funding to deal with sea flood defences? We will have a repetition of the flooding in Selsey if we are not careful. We must move on from arrangements to keep up a shingle bank as emergency and temporary provision to a more permanent scheme. The current arrangements are burning up Environment Agency money that could be used in Lewes and all over Sussex. We are in a catch 22 situation: unless the Government take action, money that could be used will never become available, because that stock of capital is being used as current expenditure. According to Environment Agency estimates, Sussex as a whole is underfunded by up to £4 million per annum. There is a money problem and the shortfall has to be made up by central Government.

My third question has also been touched on, but perhaps I can put it more directly. The plain fact is that our constituencies have all been asked to absorb large extra quantities of housing, and they cannot cope. That is a major problem in itself, but it becomes even bigger when it interacts with the flooding danger. Can the Minister say anything about planning policy guidance note 25? I understand that it will give guidance on the construction of housing in areas that are vulnerable to flooding, so can we have that soon?

Fourthly, will the Minister give us some information about the progress of the review of the current funding system, so that we can get something more sensible in place for the future?

10.23 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on initiating this debate. I join him and other hon. Members in thanking everyone who was involved in ensuring that the crisis was rapidly brought under control. He outlined the impact of the floods locally in great detail, and he asked the Minister a number of pertinent questions that I hope will be answered in detail. First, there is the question of funding for flood defences and financial assistance for Lewes and neighbouring communities. Secondly there is the question of the clarification of responsibilities in relation to flood defences.

I should like to focus on the wider picture. When something happens on our doorsteps it grabs our attention—the fuel crisis, for example. It is difficult to ignore it when we cannot find an open garage or have to queue for hours at the last place in town with petrol. But when the problem is far away, as, for example, with floods in Mozambique, India or Japan, it is easy to feel sympathy, and even to do what one can to help, but there is not such an urge to solve the root cause of the problem. It is not so immediate. We are not the ones who must pay for the clear-up. However, it is our problem. We must face the truth that what happens in other parts of the world affects us, and what we do affects others.

I am pleased that my constituency was affected only in a limited way by heavy rainfall. One group of houses was affected, and one of Thames Water's sewage plants overflowed as, regrettably, it tends to do when there is heavy rainfall. Several houses in Buckhurst avenue were contaminated. I am pleased that Thames Water responded fairly quickly and cleared up the mess rapidly. However, I hope that the appearance of distant floods on our doorsteps will serve as a timely counterpoint to the clamour surrounding the fuel crisis, just in case any politicians are more worried about the election next year than about those to come in 20 or 30 years' time.

The fuel crisis and the recent floods in south-east England bring to our doorsteps the contrasting sides of the most important problem facing the world: climate change. We must balance economic competitiveness, social justice and environmental needs. We need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Encouraging people to switch to more fuel-efficient cars by applying the fuel duty escalator seems to be a logical way to do that, but people must live their day-to-day lives, and when someone must work out how to pay the next bill, the future can seem a long way off.

[Mr. Tom Brake]

For that reason, two things must be made clear and become central considerations in policy-making. First, to save people money on fuel now could prove a false economy in the long run. Fuel costs are significant for some rural dwellers—although the majority of the rural poor do not own a car—and for hauliers. However, the recent floods in Sussex caused damage estimated at £40 million. If that is combined with the costs of the other serious floods in the United Kingdom this year—in the west country, Wales, Scotland, Yorkshire and Belfast—the price of using fossil fuels begins to climb. We will all be paying for that additional cost, in higher insurance premiums, for example. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes outlined, some people in Lewes and neighbouring communities will pay the full cost of the damage to their property, because they were without insurance.

Climate change is not solely responsible for the floods. Inadequate flood defences and the building of houses on flood plains have not helped, but climate change is a significant factor. There is a clear link between climate change and floods across the world and in the United Kingdom. World temperatures and natural disasters are on the increase; 1998 was the hottest year since records began and encompassed the highest number of natural disasters on record. A report by the World Health Organisation earlier this year stated:

"The cost of weather related disasters in the year 1998 alone exceeded the costs of all such disasters during the 1980s."

That is a worrying trend. Another report produced this year, by Christian Aid, stated that in the next 20 years, 245 climate-related disasters could happen, at an estimated cost of £6,500 billion. Very significant sums of money are involved. If the Government feel that they are being held to ransom by the fuel protesters, perhaps they should think about how much bigger a ransom they are being held to by global warming.

The second consideration is fairness. We must reduce our greenhouse gas emissions through several means, including cutting the amount of petrol used, although as I have said, people need to live their lives. It is worth noting that the British public support the environment over tax cuts, even after the fuel crisis. Last week an ICM poll showed that the public still support treating the environment as a priority, by 54 per cent. to 30 per cent., even if that means car drivers having to pay a price. However, taxation needs to be fair, with a clear purpose, instead of the money raised just disappearing into the Chancellor's legendary war chest. The Government need to be open and socially just, providing alternatives for travel and being sure to tax those who can afford it.

Protecting the environment means taxing differently, not more, which is something that my party has called for. The Government should not be scared into reducing fuel duty without proper consideration. A small cut in fuel duty is a wonderful gimmick, but it would save the average car user only a small amount. It would fail to tackle the varying needs of different types of car user and would result in no environmental gain. If there is to be a reduction, alternative environmental measures must be taken to offset the environmental damage that that will cause. We have seen the effect of such environmental damage in Lewes, Uckfield and other communities in the past few weeks.

Dealing with climate change goes beyond the immediate crisis. Short-sighted and opportunistic policies demonstrate that a comprehensive approach is needed to climate change in the United Kingdom and globally. The number of severe floods and humanitarian disasters this year goes far beyond what I described earlier. The floods in Sussex cost £40 million, which is regrettable, but 400 lives were lost in the flooding in India in August. If those were British lives, how would we react? This is our responsibility. Developed countries such as Britain generate 62 times more carbon dioxide pollution per person than the least developed countries. Arguably, people are dying because of what we do here. If we are beginning to suffer some of the same effects, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

As a nation we are beginning to take our responsibilities seriously. The problem affects us locally and globally and we must act at both levels. As to acting locally, the Government have so far failed to live up to the environmental promises that they made in opposition, although, to their credit, we compare well with other countries. I welcome the fact that the United Kingdom has at least set a target of a 12.5 per cent. reduction in CO_2 emissions, even if that is substantially lower than the target of 20 per cent. that was a manifesto commitment. I am pleased that the draft climate change programme that the Government have put forward has identified 17.5 per cent. cuts in CO_2. I hope that that will make it possible to reach the 20 per cent. goal, which cannot be compromised. The royal commission on environmental pollution has recommended that a 60 per cent. cut on carbon dioxide emissions will be needed by 2050. The Prime Minister recognised that fact in his speech yesterday.

Even if that ambitious target is achieved, there is a desperate need for preventive measures until climate change is stabilised. That means spending more money on flood defences in such places as Lewes and Uckfield. For that reason, the Government need to put the environment at the heart of their policy making, and not just to pay lip service to the fact that people care about the issue and might vote on it. Local action must be matched with global action. As one of the industrialised nations that have contributed so much to the problem of climate change, we have a moral obligation to take a lead in solving it. Britain's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, above and beyond what is required by Kyoto, is an important message to the rest of the world. However, we need to be even further ahead.

At the COP 6 summit at The Hague in November, where the Kyoto protocol will be finalised, it is likely that some countries, including Canada, Australia and, most disturbingly, the United States, will push for it to be watered down. Of the EU countries, only Britain and Germany are coming close to achieving their targets for reducing emissions. Although it is welcome news that the Deputy Prime Minister is going to the COP 6 summit, it is regrettable that the Prime Minister will not be there, to push the agenda and lead from the front. He should be there to show other countries how serious the issue is and that it cannot be fudged. If the countries of the world do not work together on the project, we can

expect many more floods in Mozambique, India and our own front yards in years to come. Members may be tired of hearing the Liberal Democrats say that the freedom of this generation should not be bought at the expense of the next, but it is true.

10.35 am

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on obtaining this debate, which is prompted by the terrible events in his constituency. He has used the occasion to raise some important issues of a more general nature, which apply to all hon. Members who have spoken today who have constituencies with a serious flood defence risk. I represent North-East Cambridgeshire, which was the Isle of Ely many years ago. From the map reproduced in *The Sunday Times* recently, one can see that hundreds of square miles in the fens are liable to flood. The risk there is probably as high as anywhere else in the country.

It is easy enough to be demoralised by the events that are the subject of the debate, but I would point to the other side of the coin. In the main, we have had a good track record for many years. If it were not for the flood defence schemes in place in the fens, whole areas of this country would be under water. We can achieve results when dealing with the problem, but it is a question of resolve, funding and, as many hon. Members have said, of organisation.

The debate has raised a number of key issues, on which I will touch briefly to give the Minister plenty of time to respond. The Government's record on the funding of flood defence in the past few years has been challenged. Planning guidance for development on flood plains has also been an important ingredient of the debate. The ramifications for insurers, individuals and companies and the question of compensation have rightly been referred to, especially by hon. Members whose constituents were affected by recent events. On compensation, perhaps the Minister can confirm that, under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, local authorities can apply for emergency funding under what is known as the Bellwin scheme. That may be a course of action open to the local authority in the constituency of the hon. Member for Lewes.

The Minister needs to clarify whether the spending levels that were recently published by a newspaper are accurate. Those figures suggested that we were spending £320 million on flood defence about five years ago and that that dropped to £301 million last year. The Minister needs to confirm what the actual figures are, if those figures are not accurate, and give assurances to the Committee that the Government are treating that key matter responsibly.

The hon. Member for Lewes said that some years ago he and the Environment Agency's director of water management warned the Minister and his Ministry about the seriousness of the situation in Lewes and Uckfield. They also said that, in terms of the global figure, flood defences in this country were underfunded by about £40 million a year. The Minister should tell the Committee whether those warnings were given and received.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I fear that there may be some misunderstanding. This is not a Committee but a sitting of the House. Furthermore, it might be for the benefit of all hon. Members present if we recall that the proceedings in this Chamber are normally presided over by a Deputy Speaker, unless sufficient Deputy Speakers are not available, in which case the name of a Chairman would be displayed to illustrate that fact.

Mr. Moss: I apologise for calling our proceedings a Committee.

Mention has been made of the recommendations of the Select Committee to revise the 50-year-old funding system through cash-strapped local authorities. It has been suggested that those ideas were put on hold at the time by both the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Treasury because of cost implications. We understand now that they have been resurrected and that a review is to be held in the near future.

I shall comment on the current scheme. It has been said that lack of funding was to blame for the flood events and that that was due to the present method of funding whereby flood defence committees receive a substantial majority of their income through a precept on the county council. It was suggested that the committees do not raise sufficient money, hence flood warning systems and defences cannot be put in place. While there has always been a problem—it would be surprising if there were not any problems with financial matters—the system has worked well for many years. The flood defence infrastructure is testimony to that.

The major sea and tidal defences in my area, particularly following the 1978 flooding in Wisbech and parts of the fens, were all funded through the current mechanism. The biggest scheme in the fens was the barrier bank on the Ouse washes, which cost between £20 million and £25 million. That substantial scheme was funded through such a measure. It is not a question of saying that such a system cannot be undertaken now; it can be done, provided that the right mechanisms are in place.

A change that has been made—one that can clearly cause difficulties—is that the Environment Agency, unlike its predecessors, can no longer borrow from the Public Works Loan Board to finance major schemes. Consequently, schemes that cost £20 million with an estimated life of 50 years are funded from revenue, which places enormous demands on the funding base. In the past, when flood defence was considered to be a long-term business, loans were taken out as part of financial management. That approach has the benefit that, ultimately, the beneficiaries of the works pay for them.

Borrowing powers are available to the Environment Agency in legislation, but it is believed that the Treasury does not favour their use. To date, the agency has not therefore sought to borrow for flood defence works. In my view, any funding problems would be removed or at least seriously reduced if prudent borrowing were pursued for flood defences providing long-term protection. It is often argued that borrowing powers are to be made use of only in emergencies. However, most people would view an inability to pay for immediately available funds as an emergency. It would be helpful if the Minister could clarify that point and say if renewed borrowing powers are being considered in the Government's review.

[Mr. Moss]

The Environment Agency was so unhappy with the Government's inaction on planning guidelines that it decided to publish flood risk maps on the internet, so that individuals could access them and determine whether they were at risk. A recent report from the agency showed that in the six months to April this year it had advised local authorities to refuse 190 planning applications because of the risk of flooding. In 83 of those cases—44 per cent.—the local authorities granted permission regardless of that advice.

It is not only the recent flooding that has raised the question of building new homes on flood plains. As recently as 14 October, the Minister said that new policy guidance was being drawn up; it would be helpful if he could elaborate on that. When he said:

> We cannot say there should never be any development on flood plains but such development must be appropriate

he left hanging in the air the big question of what is appropriate.

The Opposition call for an urgent public inquiry into the effects of the floods on house-building plans in the south of England. The Government want to build nearly a million new homes in the south-east, although local councils want a much lower figure. The devastation caused by the floods shows that a number of questions need answering. How many homes have been built in dangerous areas? How many more will have to be built on flood plains if the Government insist on sticking to their target? How much extra will have to be spent on providing defences against flooding if we continue building houses in the wrong places?

Only an independent public inquiry can tackle those questions with credibility. That view is supported by the director general of the Association of British Insurers, who said recently:

> The insurance industry recognises that natural perils, such as flooding, are becoming a more costly problem. Of particular concern is the need to identify sufficient land to support the Government's target of building 3 million new homes by 2016.

Those are important issues, some of which the Minister needs to tackle today.

10.46 am

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on securing the debate, which is very timely following the floods that have affected Sussex. He has raised several issues that I will try to address. Other hon. Members made excellent contributions on pertinent points about flood defence strategy.

As hon. Members know, the flooding in Kent and Sussex was the worst for more than 30 years. The situation was exceptional, and that needs to be stressed. About a month's rainfall fell in 24 hours. The scale of flooding overwhelmed the defences, even where they had been uprated. As the hon. Member for Lewes said, it is likely that the identified defences in Lewes would have been overwhelmed by such extreme rainfall. I place on record my sympathy for all those who have been affected. I visited the area and talked to members of the community, including business owners and residents. The floods have caused great inconvenience and loss.

I congratulate the emergency services, which responded superbly. It was fortunate that they carried out emergency exercises over the summer—as one of the high-level targets that I set, as the Minister responsible—with the Environment Agency following the Northampton floods and the Agriculture Committee inquiry. It is good to see such an exercise delivering the results that people need.

The automatic voice-messaging system, which is available to people in flood-risk areas, also works well. I have talked to people who have the facility and who received the warnings. The upgraded national warning system also appears to have worked well: people were given warnings and the floodline emergency number was broadcast on the national news and the weather forecast. The Environment Agency's floodline dealt with approximately 40,000 calls from the public between 8 and 18 October, so awareness is increasing.

The Environment Agency has also produced flood-risk maps, which have been helpful to local authorities in predicting flood risk. *The Sunday Times* article claimed, in one of its many inaccuracies, that the agency had introduced flood-risk maps out of a sense of frustration with the Government, but they were in fact another high-level target that I set as the Minister responsible, working in conjunction with the agency. I shall return to other inaccuracies in that article.

I shall now deal with points made by hon. Members. It is true that local authorities—including that of the hon. Member for Lewes—can make applications to central Government for exceptional spending under the Bellwin scheme. All local authorities are expected to have contingency reserves to deal with emergencies, but there will clearly be additional expenditure when there is an emergency of the scale of the floods in Sussex and Kent. There is a formula for the matter, which involves thresholds. Once an authority has spent beyond the threshold, it can apply to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions for additional funding for the problems.

Following my discussions with local authority members in Lewes and other areas, I wrote to my colleagues in the DETR to say that, although the Bellwin formula was appreciated, the process had been felt to be slow. Local authorities need applications to be dealt with as quickly as possible so that funds are released. I asked my colleagues to see that applications are dealt with as speedily and sympathetically as possible, so that required help can be given.

The point about insurance is difficult. As has always been the case, the Government cannot provide compensation for insurable risks. Some historic properties may qualify for support from English Heritage, but that depends on the details and merits of individual properties. I am happy about the fund that has been set up by the mayor for people who have no insurance. Such floods have happened in other parts of the country, resulting in people without insurance needing help. The issue is complicated, but it has been dealt with successfully elsewhere. I might assist the hon. Member for Lewes by putting him in touch with people with experience of handling such matters, so that he can learn from them.

I accept the hon. Gentleman's point about value added tax. As a constituency Member of Parliament, I have found the Inland Revenue understanding and

sympathetic in such emergencies. I am sure that that will be so in this case, so he should draw matters to its attention.

Several hon. Members raised the subject of agriculture, which is difficult as there is no Government facility to deal with compensation for extreme weather conditions. If memory serves me, I am right to say that there are sometimes problems with re-sowing and arable-area payments, so we may have to make some representations to the European Commission about flexibility for those who have to re-sow due to losing crops as a result of flood damage. I give hon. Members an undertaking that I shall consider the issue with colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to see whether we can assist on it.

The hon. Member for Lewes was right to say that he raised the subject of flood walls in previous debates. Disputes about ownership and liability have been a problem, but are now on the way to a resolution. Grant aid from the Ministry is available for such schemes, so they must be resolved locally.

I want to deal robustly with the allegations in the article in *The Sunday Times*. There has been no cut in the Ministry's flood defence expenditure, but a significant increase year on year. I am not sure where the figures in the article have come from. I can give hon. Members the budget figures as they stand. The Environment Agency's total flood defence expenditure, which is derived from levy income and MAFF grant, was £261.8 million in 1998-99. In 1999-2000, that rose to £276.1 million. The budget for 2000-01 is £283.1 million, although planned expenditure for 2001-02 is £290.1 million. There is a rising spend on flood and coastal defence in this country; there has not been a cut. There might be some regional differences owing to regional flood defence committees not passing on the full standard spending assessment levy. That has been a problem in some parts of the country. I have drawn that to the attention of the relevant committees and will do so again if necessary.

Several hon. Members mentioned institutional funding. How funds are raised and the different bodies that are involved, such as local and regional flood defence committees, are subject to a review that is due to report in September 2001. Hon. Members will have an opportunity to read that report.

I understand that the catchment plan for Lewes is being considered in order to examine how to deal with flood defence. As hon. Members know, I have asked the Environment Agency to examine the causes and effects of the recent flooding in Sussex and Kent; the accuracy of weather forecasting; how the response was managed, including the operation of emergency plans and flood-warning arrangements; and the lessons that can be learned from the floods.

No Government, including ours, can guarantee that floods will not happen in this country. Sometimes there is no obvious engineering solution. Defences can be overwhelmed, and defences put in one place can have detrimental effects in others. The problem is not simple. However, we can try to improve, and have improved, the national flood-warning system. In addition, we can try to ensure that people receive warnings and that people who are at risk are aware of them.

Several hon. Members mentioned planning guidance, which is important. My colleagues in the DETR are introducing PPG25, which will include strengthened planning guidance for planning authorities on flood plain development and will strengthen the Environment Agency's role in advising planning authorities about what is suitable.

Mr. Brake: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Morley: I have only four minutes left, and I want to cover as much as possible.

Development on flood plains is not precluded, but its effects must be considered. Development must be appropriate, and mitigation measures might have to be implemented, which developers may have to fund. All those issues must be taken into account.

To respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle), I am sure that the Environment Agency's evaluation will examine the issues of the sluice gates at Rye and of flood plain development. As the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) said, development issues are involved. He mentioned agrimonetary compensation. As a result of the small print in the Fontainebleu agreement—the rebate agreement negotiated by Baroness Thatcher—no money is available in Europe for which we may apply. The £91 million requested will have to be found out of Treasury funds, from United Kingdom taxpayers, and, given the extra £221 million package that was announced recently, there is pressure on finances. Difficulties are being experienced, but all aspects are being examined.

Following my correspondence with the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) after we met, I understand that £800,000 is being committed this financial year to start the scheme to which he referred, and that it is proposed that it will be finished in Chichester in 2002. Some compulsory purchase issues are being resolved. Capital grants from the Ministry for Chichester and Selsey are ready and waiting. It is merely a question of devising the schemes and submitting them to the Ministry. We are waiting for the preferred option for Selsey following the Environment Agency's consultation.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) is right about global warming. A case can be made for environmental taxes, and the Government have introduced the climate change levy. We have made more progress than many countries in meeting our carbon dioxide targets. It is too early to say whether we are experiencing a pattern of extreme weather, but there is no doubt that the issues of climate change and carbon dioxide are serious. In contemplating environmental taxes, people must examine what happened in Sussex and Kent and appreciate the end result and implications of climate change.

I agree with the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) that, considering that this country is surrounded by sea, and has heavy rainfall and many river systems, our flood defence record is very good. Of course, that does not mean that it cannot be improved. We should not be complacent, and we are considering the lessons that can be learned. We want to improve schemes, and we are increasing our budget year on year.

Osteopaths Act 1993

11am

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I am delighted to have obtained this debate and I feel particularly fortunate in securing parliamentary time to discuss what are extremely important matters. I am well aware that many hon. Members have tried for some time to secure such a debate. Clearly, hon. Members of all parties are concerned about the issues that will be raised today.

I should say at the outset that I totally support the registration process for complementary therapies. I doubt whether any hon. Member would object to that process, provided that it is fair, transparent, rigorous, and designed to ensure consistent standards, excellence and quality in all such therapies. We support registration for a number of reasons. For example, it provides consistency and quality for members of the public, who are entitled to know that the people to whom they seek recourse are qualified, safe, competent and excellent practitioners.

I am sure that we all support the registration process in principle and I am particularly pleased that it is taking place in a number of therapeutic areas. Registration, if it does not give a seal of approval, recognises the value of complementary therapies that the health service has undervalued for far too long, although it is true that recognition has increased in the past few years—not simply because of a failure of conventional medicine, but because complementary therapies can often work hand in hand with it to treat the whole person, treating symptoms that are not always susceptible to a conventional approach.

We support registration, whether it be for psychotherapists, physiotherapists, chiropractors or anyone involved in therapeutic practice. Proper regulation is vital to maintaining standards and public confidence and safety. I have no doubt that the overwhelming majority of practitioners support registration as well. They want the public to know that they can rely on the service offered by registered practitioners. Registration helps them to promote their practice and is in everyone's best interest.

That is registration in principle and, where it is rigorous, transparent and fair, all parties would of course sign up to it. However, Mr. Chairman, it is becoming increasingly clear—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. It might be helpful if I remind all hon. Members that proceedings in Westminster Hall are overseen by a Deputy Speaker unless a name is displayed on the Table here in front of me, which may happen today from 12 noon onwards. In such a case, proceedings are overseen by a Chairman. Those are the requirements of the House and I am obliged to bring them to hon. Members' attention.

Ms Blears: My apologies, Mr. Deputy Speaker; I sought clarification, although clearly in the wrong direction. I shall bear your comments in mind and I hope that we will abide by the noon hour and change our procedure as the clock strikes 12.

Unfortunately, it has become increasingly clear to me and many other hon. Members that the registration process has not proceeded smoothly. Trust and confidence between many practitioners and those responsible for the registration process is on the verge of breaking down. The process was brought about by the Osteopaths Act 1993, which seems a long time ago. I should have hoped for the smoothing out of initial difficulties in the subsequent seven years, but that seems not to have happened. In 1993, around 4,300 osteopaths were practising with no regulation. There were nine voluntary registers and 11 colleges offered courses in osteopathy. All branches of the profession decided that it would be right to bring osteopaths together under one umbrella organisation with a proper education committee, proper standards and proper qualifications. The profession was approaching recognition and its members entered the process with enthusiasm, putting behind them their difficulties, professional cliques and factions. They found harmony and consensus in the bright new world of 1993 and osteopaths were united.

Unfortunately, since the legislation was enacted, just over 2,000 osteopaths have registered and many hundreds are boycotting the registration process because they have lost faith and confidence in it. Approximately 100 of those who have continued to apply have been refused registration, although many of them have practised for many years with a clear record and no complaints. Seven years after the passing of the Act and after the expiry of the two-year transitional period in May, they have still not achieved registration. My concern is that, since May, they have faced the possibility of criminal prosecution and a fine of up to £5,000 for continuing to advertise themselves as osteopaths if they are not registered, although they may have been in practice for 25 years and have great professional respect. It is sad that the profession should find itself in that position.

Information that I have received from practitioners has caused me deep concern about the process. The Department of Health should treat the matter seriously because the allegations that have been made to me, if they prove to be based on fact, go to the heart of the registration process and its integrity. It is worrying that long-term practitioners are boycotting the process or submitting applications and then withdrawing them because of their experience of it.

A couple of cases have been brought to my attention by my constituents. The first concerns Dr. Kalman, who is a holistic practitioner of many years' standing. He has been an osteopath since 1981 and has a background in European and Chinese therapies. He is a renowned practitioner not only in Salford but far beyond. He has a regular radio programme, writes a newspaper column and his advice is widely acknowledged. He makes no bones about being a holistic practitioner, although that may be the wrong choice of words. When people come to him with a pain in the back, headache, nausea, migraine and other problems, he looks not only at the symptoms but at the causes of the condition. He tries to explore their lifestyle, the pressures that they suffer and their posture and to discover whether the problem arises from a physical, emotional or mental health problem. He does not profess to be a doctor in all those areas, but he is a therapist and explores the underlying, deep structural causes of people's ill health, instead of treating them mechanically and manipulatively. He is committed to that approach. He has held a recognised qualification since 1981, has been in practice, has never

had a complaint made against him and is, in the terms of the Act, a man of "good health" and "good character", which is a requirement for registration.

The registration process also requires a professional profile and portfolio, which includes an extensive self-evaluation of the applicant's practice. Situations are suggested, people's problems are described and the applicant must decide how to respond as a practitioner: what to recommend, what approach to take, what questions to ask and what information to seek. The applicant must show the General Osteopathic Council how patients would be treated and decisions would be made and what criteria would be considered when someone came with a problem.

The professional profile and portfolio contains a host of such questions. It is a complex process, which—practitioners have told me—takes several weeks to complete and must give an in-depth analysis of the approach that is to be taken. Dr. Kalman, full of enthusiasm for the registration process, filled in his PPP and was called for a clinical interview by the General Osteopathic Council. During that interview, there was no examination of his practice, competence or safety, which are the requirements of the Act. What took place was an esoteric, philosophical discussion about his holistic approach and whether it accorded with the standards and criteria—or, perhaps, views—of the members of the council.

The crux of the matter is this. Does the process judge whether someone is safe, competent and lawful in carrying out the practice of an osteopath, or does it impose a subjective set of views—those of a particular section of the profession—of what it is to be an osteopath? Practitioners who adopt a holistic approach to their patients are finding that they do not meet the narrow paradigm that is set by the General Osteopathic Council for qualification to become registered. That is a serious matter. Registration processes are designed to ensure quality and excellence, but should not be a straitjacket that leads to conformity and reduces the diversity of excellent practice that can be performed. In any profession there are different ways of doing things—one approach is not necessarily better than the others, provided that they are all safe, lawful and competently applied.

A huge debate is taking place in the medical profession in general about the holistic model and the purely medical model. The jury is still out, and I am sure that it will be out for a long time—difficult matters of balance are involved. However, it is wrong to interview someone with a tremendously respected practice in such a way that he loses faith in the process because he feels that he is being questioned on his philosophical approach, not his competence. Dr. Kalman has now withdrawn his application and wants nothing more to do with the process. That is a great loss to the profession.

Even more worrying is the fact that therapists such as Dr. Kalman are talking about setting up an alternative register. That would take us back to the situation of 10, 20 or 30 years ago, when there were first-class osteopaths, second-class osteopaths and a variety of different organisations. An umbrella organisation should bring people together, leading to consensus, harmony and unity within the profession, and thereby to public trust. If we end up with different registers because of an internal dispute, the public will be the losers.

Another important issue is the way in which the process has been carried out. Dr. Kalman has brought several worrying cases to my attention. For example, seven osteopathic practitioners in Lancashire got together—almost like students cheating at an exam—to look at a PPP application. Having considered the questions on their clinical practices, they completed and submitted identical papers giving the same answers. Of that group of seven, one received full registration, two received conditional registration and four were failed completely. That gives rise to great concern about the consistency and fairness of the way in which the process is implemented. The Department of Health should investigate on that basis alone.

I was also told about a group of about 35 practitioners who followed the answers to a PPP application that had been worked out by a certain doctor and submitted all 35 applications together. Instead of being refused registration because they had colluded, they were all granted conditional registration for a year on the basis that, provided that they behaved themselves during that year, they would go on to receive full registration. When people who have been excluded from registration see that sort of operation, they understandably form the opinion that one is more likely to receive registration if one's views fit the picture than if one takes a different, perhaps controversial, approach. The purpose of registration is to be fair and transparent—if it is not, an investigation is merited.

Support for young people and students is another concern. Many young people have embarked on expensive, long-term courses in osteopathy. A young man in my constituency has undertaken a three-year course with the Faculty of Osteopaths, but has now discovered that that is no longer one of the recognised organisations. This is not someone who has done a few weekend courses. He has done a three-year course, and was about to embark on his MSc when he found out that his course would not be recognised. He was forced to abandon his practice, his livelihood has suffered, as has his personal health, and he is in dire personal circumstances. He submitted his application for registration and it was refused in September last year. The board promised that it would provide pathways of support and advice about further courses that he could take to ensure that he fulfilled the conditions. It promised to provide him with a mentor to guide him towards being able to practise fully.

I should like to tell hon. Members a little about this young man's experiences with the General Osteopathic Council. His application was rejected in September last year. He was told that until the deadline for registration—May this year—no college could be recommended to him because colleges had not been accredited. He therefore had nowhere to go to obtain his top-up course, to fulfil the conditions for registration. His own clinic was closed in December last year and he subsequently contacted the General Osteopathic Council to ask for support, guidance and mentors on 22 May, 14 June, 22 June, 27 June—twice—4 August, 11 September, 16 September and 21 September. He made telephone contact, left messages, and asked the director of education to get in touch with him. This

[Ms Blears]

young man is desperate to fulfil the conditions: he wants to be an osteopath. However, he is receiving no support, and no guidance as to how to deal with the situation. One can imagine the effect that that is having on him.

Such a lack of efficiency in implementation must lead practitioners to the view that they are being discriminated against in the registration process. This all serves to destroy confidence in the system, and to fragment the profession yet again. These extremely serious matters merit an investigation. I have written to Department of Health Ministers on two occasions. On the first, I received a letter saying that the process was new, that there would be teething problems and that matters would settle down. Having received further information, I wrote again in March this year asking for an investigation. Unfortunately, that request has not been taken up and the Minister's reply again suggests that it is inevitable that some people will be refused and that the process is in its early days. The Minister finishes her letter, if I may remind her, by saying that registration is important—with which I agree—and that

> a profession to be proud of does not take short cuts to high standards and osteopathy is no exception.

I agree entirely. A profession to be proud of should provide a fair, rigorous, transparent registration process, in which practitioners and the public can have faith and confidence. At present, I do not believe that practitioners or the public can have faith in the procedures adopted by the General Osteopathic Council. I should like the Minister to agree to an independent inquiry into the criteria adopted by the council—to ascertain whether there is a dispute between the holistic and the medical models—and into their implementation, because a bureaucratic nightmare exists and people are not receiving the support that they need to become proud members of the profession.

11.18 am

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I congratulate the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on securing a debate on a subject of considerable interest to many hon. Members' constituents. As you will appreciate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a sad fact that, due to the parliamentary recess and the nature of the ballot for these debates, hon. Members were given very little notice that this debate had been allocated to the hon. Lady. Many hon. Members, who have written both to her and to me, would have liked to be here today but are unable to attend. The hon. Lady and I will endeavour to represent their interests as well as those of our own constituents—in my case, my constituent, Mr. Tony Matthews—as best we can.

I share with the Minister and the hon. Lady the thesis that the thrust of the Osteopaths Act 1993 was to provide a framework for registration and for what the hon. Lady described as consistency and quality within the profession. I do not know of any Member of Parliament who has written to me on behalf of a constituent who takes anything other than that view. Our difficulty is not the Act itself, but that its interpretation and implementation have not led to consistency and quality. In fact, they have led to the reverse.

On the balance of views held within the osteopathic professions, there is grave concern about the manner in which the General Osteopathic Council, as it chooses to call itself, has been constructed. Specific worry has been expressed about its chairmanship and whether that is lawful. Detailed concerns exist about the professional personal profile that the council has chosen to impose on many of its longstanding and professional members and the manner in which the approved colleges that teach osteopathy have been accredited.

First, I thank and pay tribute to Mr. Amadée Turner who was a distinguished Member of the European Parliament for 15 years prior to 1994. He telephoned me on behalf of Mr. John Wernham, who runs the John Wernham college and who has been practising classical osteopathy since the early 1900s. He is now 94 years old and his college has not been accredited. Mr Turner rightly pointed out to me that there is a difference of views between those who support modern osteopathy and those who prefer classical osteopathy, as the hon. Member for Salford said. The modernists control the General Osteopathic Council and they have chosen, almost arbitrarily, to reject traditional classical views. As a result, those schools teaching the classical method, such as the John Wernham school, have been left outside the net together with their students, and there are four such schools.

Mr. Turner believes that the schools have been wrongly excluded from training. There is no demand for such an exclusion within the Act. The manner in which the council has imposed its standards gives no clue as to proficiency. It simply determines that people can fill in a form or, as I shall demonstrate in a moment, that someone can get someone else to fill in the form for him. There is an in-built bias in the assessment of schools that teach osteopathy. Too much emphasis is placed on modern osteopathy, while not enough is placed on classical. The fault lies within the implementation and interpretation of the Act, not within the Act itself. It is the manner in which the General Osteopathic Council has chosen to implement the Act that caused the first problem.

The construction of the council is a cause for grave concern. I shall quote from a letter that I received from David Dyer, a registered osteopath, on behalf of the British and European Osteopaths Association. He was heavily involved, as were several others, in the original discussions that set up the council and said:

> as chairperson of one of the voluntary associations (BEOA), I participated in the discussions which preceded the formation of GOsC.
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> The last consensus meetings, held at the Gay Hussar restaurant in London, were attended by the chairpersons of all the existing osteopathic associations—

that is, the 11 to which the hon. Member for Salford referred—

> and therefore represented the entire profession. We unanimously agreed to amalgamate, as the Government had requested, to form one umbrella register. The registration process was to be all-inclusive, in that every osteopath on the database held by the Osteopathic Information Service (OIS) would be registered. In a private conversation, Simon Fielding further assured me that no *bona fide* osteopath would be excluded from the Register and only envisaged that two or three applicants would fail to achieve registration. When I asked what he meant by this statement, he replied that GOsC might receive applications from bogus practitioners who purported to have an osteopathic qualification.

As for conditional registrants, we agreed that if there had been no claims against them after one year of practice they would automatically achieve full registration. We were all led to believe that this would happen.

During these meetings there was no mention of the Professional Profile and Portfolio (PPP) or mentoring. Had either of these been proposed, I know for a fact that my association and also the Guild of Osteopaths, under the leadership of Ian Swash, would have withdrawn our support from the negotiations. Since the combined BEOA and Guild became the second largest osteopathic association, we represented approximately 40 per cent. of the profession.

The membership of the new Council was shrouded in a veil of secrecy probably because the Council members were, with two exceptions, drawn from a single association (the General Council and Register of Osteopaths). I was only informed of the new Council the night before it was announced at the Department of Health.

Ian Swash, the leader of the Guild of Osteopaths, has written to confirm that what David Dyer says is absolutely correct. He writes:

I can confirm that Mr. Dyer's account of the consensus meetings held at the Gay Hussar is entirely accurate...in my case the first intimation I had as to the composition of the General Osteopathic Council was at a breakfast meeting (to which I had been invited at very short notice) on the day of the official announcement. Mr. Dyer was also present at that meeting. Prior to announcing his own appointment as the General Osteopathic Council's chairman, Mr. Fielding said in the presence of Mr. Dyer and others: "I'm afraid, Ian, this is going to come as a shock to you".

Having just learned that 10 out of the 12 osteopath members of the GOsC had been appointed from the association of which Mr. Fielding himself was the Chairman, this came as no shock to me at all.

You may be able to understand from those two letters, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why there is grave concern about the manner in which the members of the council, from which all else has flowed since, were appointed.

There is also concern about the appointment of the chairman. The Osteopaths Act 1993 states clearly that the chairman of the General Osteopathic Council should be a layman. I have before me a list of the members of the working party on osteopathy, which, under the chairmanship of Sir Thomas Bingham, led to the establishment of the Act. The fourth name on that list is Mr. S. Fielding and, under note 4 at the foot of that list, it states that Mr. Fielding is a

practising osteopath and Vice-Registrar General Council and Register of Osteopaths.

I fail to see how even the meanest intelligence can interpret that appointment as one of a layman. In that respect, the General Osteopathic Council is in clear breach of the Act that it seeks to implement.

I raised all those concerns with members of the General Osteopathic Council, meeting with them here in the House, and we have had a fairly copious correspondence since. A letter to one osteopath from Miss Madeleine Craggs, the chief executive and registrar of the council, states:

We have gone to great pains to be fair by maintaining consistency.

Let us examine that consistency for a moment. Mr. Anthony Baird, director of the Institute for Complementary Medicine, writes:

The actions of the newly formed General Osteopathic Council have alienated osteopaths who support self-regulation and registration and, such are its powers, there is a fear that it will attempt to "take over" the whole of Complementary medicine...

The ICM supports regulation but not in this way.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) passed me a letter this mornig from his constituent Mr. John Scott-Cameron of the Probro Clinic for Natural Therapeutics. Mr. Scott-Cameron writes:

I feel that I have been excluded from the profession I love by the intransigent attitude of the GOsC in failing to exercise discretion for practitioners of long and safe service under a "Grandfather Clause".

He also states:

It is my deeply held conviction that all practising Osteopaths should have been admitted to the Register as in the formation of all other Professions and that steps to improve professional competence be initiated through the most excellent programme of CPD.

Andrew Sims, an osteopath, of the Oakspring natural health centre, says that

there are many disgruntled osteopaths fearing for their livelihoods as a result of the disgraceful way the register has been formulated.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton) has passed me a letter from Christopher Bell, another osteopath, who says:

I graduated from the British School of Osteopathy in 1987 and have been practising as an osteopath until May this year and since as an independent practitioner.

I could not bring myself to join the General Osteopathic Council...

—for reasons outlined in a letter that he attached—

ultimately there is little point in the continuance of the profession with such compromising of academic standards, dubious ethical standards shown by the officers of the GOsC and undemocratic leanings.

He comments in some depth—because of lack of time, I will not quote it—about those administering the PPP and the way in which they have shown intolerance to osteopaths who were trained at establishments other than the British School of Osteopathy.

On 11 September, I wrote to Madeleine Craggs and asked her the questions that have been raised with me: whether the PPP was regarded as a questionnaire, as everybody thought, or an examination. I asked why, as I had been led to believe, special, exceptional provision had been made for GP osteopaths seeking to join the register. I asked what action the council has taken to discipline those who appear to have taken advantage of what I described as assistance with the completion of their applications. On 26 September, Miss Craggs replied:

The PPP is described in the Rules as "the questionnaire"... There is no exceptional provision made for GP or doctor osteopaths... Those who are found to have achieved registration fraudulently will be removed from the Register.

Let us take a look at the efficiency of the PPP. I will offer only one example. On 3 April, Mr. Derrick Edwards, the council's director of education, wrote to Mr. Andrew Mackay of Worthing:

I am writing to you on behalf of the Registrar to invite you to submit some additional information concerning an aspect of your Modified Professional Profile and Portfolio.

The information you have supplied so far has been very helpful. We feel however, that your claim for registration should be strengthened by the addition of further evidence.

Brilliant—the recipient of that letter requesting further information had not even submitted an application for registration: so much for the council's record-keeping.

[Mr. Roger Gale]

A rejected applicant, Anne Neal, of Solihull in the west midlands, sought to appeal against rejection because she had treated the PPP as a questionnaire—which is precisely what Miss Craggs described it as in her letter to me—not an examination paper. In desperation, Anne Neal wrote on 3 April to Miss Craggs saying,

> I now understand that it is not really an Appeal at all but merely a legal exercise to ensure that you have followed correctly the procedures laid down by the General Osteopathic Council—

we must bear in mind that those procedures are laid down by the council, not by the 1993 Act. Ms Neal also says:

> I have an Honours Degree in Chemistry from the University of London, and a Masters Degree in Clinical Biochemistry as well as my Diploma in Osteopathy. It is not that I do not understand contraindications to Manipulative therapy.
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> I studied for five years at the College of Osteopaths and spent one thousand hours gaining clinical experience.

I can offer no better summary of the argument than that sent me by the Association of Osteomyologists, commenting on the attitude taken by Mr. Fielding and Miss Craggs. It reads:

> We all know re: the original members of the founding committees, that the PPP was put forward as a questionnaire for the reference as to each Osteopaths way of working for the GOsC data base. If it had been known that this document was to be used as a basis of safety and competence, the founding committees would never have agreed. Having gone through the process, and filled out the PPP, resulting in my full registration, I can quite honestly state that, with all my reference books etc. and concentrated work, that the PPP as a written document could not possibly be taken as the measure of somebody's safety and competence.

We should remember that there is no special provision for general practitioners or doctor osteopaths. The letter continues:

> In regards to the provisions made for G.P.s or Doctor/Osteopaths, the GOsC is already allowing them to state on their own exclusive website that Doctor Osteopaths are superior to other Osteopaths, this of course, has no merit whatsoever as an Osteopath is an Osteopath, no matter what other training he/she has had. We ourselves were told by Doctor Members of the LCOM (London College of Osteopathic Medicine) having found one of their members PPP acceptable, the rest simply copied this document and submitted. It was quite a while before the GOsC realised the duplicity, and then stopped them in their tracks. They were also told that their members would be put on a year's provisional registration, which they accepted, but told GOsC that they were not prepared to go for reviews or mentoring. Apparently GOsC assured them that after the one year provisional, they would be allowed on the register as full members.

Finally, Mr. Melvin Jessup, a registered osteopath, writes:

> If GOsC having nothing to fear and can prove that all aspects of the process were fairly and competently implemented in accordance with Act. Then they should welcome an early review instead.. of a Court challenge made under Human Rights Act, at a latter date.

I hope that, in the brief time that I have had available and with the tolerance of all hon. Members, I have set out the background to the concern felt by so many people. They feel that, as qualified people, they have been and are being excluded by a cabal set up to administer the implementation of an Act. In the light of the overwhelming evidence, I ask the Minister to instigate a full and public inquiry into the implementation and working of the Act.

Catherine Hamilton-Plant, the president of the British Osteopathic Association, wrote to me saying:

> The Association fully supports the standard of proficiency adopted by the GOsC and believes the GOsC has acted properly and in accordance with the legislation in administering the initial registration process.

It will not surprise anyone to know that the BOA is, in effect if not literally, a wholly owned subsidiary of the General Osteopathic Council, so she would say that.

The positions of Simon Fielding, Madeleine Craggs and Catherine Hamilton-Plant are untenable. I urge the Minister to implement an inquiry that many hon. Members—not only those present, but many others on both sides of the House—feel must be held.

11.38 am

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): I echo the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on obtaining this Adjournment debate.

The constituents of mine at whose behest I participate in the debate warmly welcomed the Osteopaths Act 1993, which, through its provisions of unification and registration, purported to assure the public that those who put "Osteopath" on their shingle were qualified to treat patients safely. Both the constituents who made representations to me had practised osteopathy for a considerable time, to the great benefit of their patients and to the quality of the profession. However, like my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and the hon. Member for North Thanet, they are concerned about the allegation that the General Osteopathic Council is a cabal that has not abided by the spirit or the facts of the Osteopaths Act 1993.

As we have heard, fewer than 2,000 osteopaths out of a total of 4,500 registered in the transitional period, which ended on 9 May this year. My constituents have made it abundantly clear to me that there is wide agreement within the profession on the requirements for qualifying standards of treatment, probity and best practice in the field. My constituents allege that, far from the general council reflecting the entire profession, it is merely a reworking of the old General Council and Register of Osteopaths. I understand that the general council has 15 members; a constituent tells me that 13 of those members of the council are drawn from that one previously defining body for osteopathy, whereas representation drawn from the eight other previous bodies is limited to one member from just two of those bodies. As the hon. Member for North Thanet said, what we understood to be a requirement in the Act—that the chairman of the council should be a lay member—is far from being met.

A constituent was offered a place on the new register after having completed the professional profile portfolio, which, it is claimed,

> can identify practitioners who are not safe and competent

without taking any account of training or years in practice. He wrote to me alleging that the process is open to collusion and cheating, which are extremely serious allegations. My constituent goes on to say that the conditions attached to the offer of a place on the new register have required him to employ a firm of solicitors with expertise in administrative law to require the general council to explain the reasoning behind its action.

That appears to conflict with the intention behind the 1993 Act. No hon. Member present, none of my constituents and no practising osteopath would deny that the essential foundation of all such legislation must be the protection of the public. However, my constituent is worried that that has become a mantra that the general council is using to deflect and delay questioning and answers.

Anxiety has also been expressed about the fees charged for registration. I have been told that the level of fees has an especially heavy impact on osteopaths who engage in their professional activities part time. It is a reflection, not of sexual bias on my part, but of the evidence presented to me by my constituents, to point out that part-time practitioners are mainly women.

According to the evidence that has been presented to me, and according to my constituents who have been practising osteopaths for a considerable period of time, having been trained at relevant colleges before they began practising, an Act that should have heightened the reputation and unified the professional practices of osteopaths is being used to safeguard the interests of a small proportion of that profession. The result might be that a split forms in the profession: as my hon. Friend the Member for Salford said, some practitioners are already arguing that an entirely separate register should be set up.

The overarching and most important facet of our discussion is that, unless they are properly answered and examined, these criticisms can lead the public to believe only that an honourable profession that can bring enormous improvement in people's lives is essentially not to be trusted. I have no doubt that the Minister and the Department of Health will take those considerations into account and examine the issue in detail, to ensure that not only the letter but the spirit of the 1993 Act is implemented throughout the profession.

If an inquiry is needed into the membership of and the creation of the present general council, it should take place at the earliest opportunity. Patients can suffer enormous and long-term damage if osteopathic treatment is not carried out properly, and that is not what my constituents want. The care and treatment of patients is central to their arguments, and I find it distressing that the General Osteopathic Council does not appear to share those concerns.

I urge the Minister and the Department to call in the council at the earliest opportunity. They should put to it the questions that have been raised this morning, which represent a mere fraction of the questions that have been put to me. They warrant answers. A measure that should have been of benefit to the general public, but appears to have become the antithesis of that, can thus be set back on the proper course—a course that the profession as a whole welcomed and the House endorsed in 1993.

11.46 am

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): I have not been lobbied by any osteopaths and I approach the matter from a slightly different angle. Originally, I had a lot of information from the Association of Osteomyology and I had a number of concerns about some of its statements; I balanced that by approaching the General Osteopathic Council. It is fair to say that, 20 to 25 years ago, osteopathy was regarded as a form of alternative medicine—not by its practitioners or the many who benefited from it, but by the traditional medical profession. That is no longer the case. Osteopathy is now highly regarded and it is therefore right and proper that it should seek to regulate itself.

In many ways, osteopathy can be regarded as the first alternative therapy to have come of age. It faces some adult decisions, but it is probably safe to say that it suffers from the lack of a suitable role model. We have heard about the introduction of the Osteopaths Act 1993, since when the various provisions of which have been commenced in stages. The General Osteopathic Council was set up by approaching the many relevant groups, but someone somewhere made a decision on how to select its membership from those groups, and I should be interested to hear how that decision was reached. It has been put to me that the predominant group was probably dominant in the profession anyway, but an unfair balance appears to have been struck.

The statutory register was then opened and the registration process began, and since 9 May the title osteopath may be used only by those on the register. So far, so good—it is right that the public now have some protection and reassurance. They know that someone calling himself an osteopath will be a safe and competent practitioner, or at least that he is deemed to be so by the profession; that he will be covered by professional indemnity insurance; and that he is bound by a strict and enforceable code of practice. As with the traditional medical professions, a practitioner can be struck off the register for malpractice and then cannot legally continue to practice.

It all sounds very good, but, as is so often the case, the devil is in the detail. How does one regulate more than 4,000 osteopaths with nine different voluntary registers and with different colleges providing different qualifications? With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that whatever was done, someone was bound to be upset. The GOC had to try to devise a fair and equitable way of dealing with the diversity of practitioners, but whether that has been achieved is open to debate.

Practitioners had to be given a chance to show that they could fulfil the criteria of safe and competent practice, and I question why any confident and competent professional would refuse to undergo that process. The hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) used a good example. Dr. Kalman is an holistic practitioner—the description given is not that of an osteopathic practitioner per se. I should probably quite happily visit Dr. Kalman, but not necessarily if I specifically wanted an osteopath; I would visit Dr. Kalman if I wanted to visit a holistic practitioner.

In this day and age, it is not right that a certain number of years in practice should result in automatic qualification. Some people who previously called themselves osteopaths have less medical knowledge than others and take a different approach. Although that is not to say that their approach is not right, the fundamental question must be asked whether it is, strictly speaking, osteopathy.

The General Osteopathic Council came up with the idea of using the professional profile and portfolio—PPP, as it is affectionately, or perhaps not affectionately,

[Sandra Gidley]

known. Osteopaths had to provide details of experience, how they kept up to date, the number and type of patients treated, and details of good character. They also had to work through the case studies: those are 47 pages long and it is claimed that they take 40 hours to complete, but I did a straw poll of local osteopaths who all said that they took much longer. If an application was deemed insufficient, further written evidence was requested, or the osteopath was called for a further interview. Twenty per cent. of applicants were interviewed, a result that could be viewed in two ways: it could be thought either that the General Osteopathic Council was taking its job seriously or that it was conducting a witch hunt. I believe that it was trying to do its best in difficult circumstances.

How is the process scrutinised? Some of the examples that I have heard today of people sending in copied applications, each of which was treated differently, give rise to concern. The basic idea behind the process was good, but it has become soured by what appears to an outsider to be infighting. The fact that there used to be nine voluntary registers gives a clue to the diversity of practices that had to be included in a single entity. As usual, minority views lost, and it seems that a subset of "would-be" osteopaths—I use the term "would-be" in inverted commas, since clearly they regard themselves as being osteopaths already—feels that it is being marginalised because the ways of its members are not those of the majority.

In many ways the issue is one of branding. A brand name is used to give an identity so that consumers know what they are getting. In this case, the General Osteopathic Council had, in effect, to decide what the brand "osteopath" should mean and to regulate accordingly. Therein lies the problem. Four to 5 per cent. of applicants were denied registration. That might appear to be a high figure, but I suspect that if any other medical profession were to be regulated from scratch, a similar proportion of practitioners would not be up to date and would not conform to current accepted safe practice. Those denied registration are able to carry on practising, as long as they do not call themselves osteopaths. I understand that some are calling themselves osteomyologists. That is fine, because the public know that in those cases they are getting something different from the brand "osteopath".

One aspect of the regulation concerns me greatly: the way in which the accreditation of the schools of osteopathy and the courses has been organised. The schools of osteopathy knew about the changes dating from 1993, and by September 1997 all schools had become involved in the process of developing a standard of proficiency. However, late in the day, some of the schools have been refused accreditation. My sympathies lie with the students, some of whom have completed two or three years of study, only to find that their hoped-for qualification is useless.

It could be argued that the schools should bear some of the responsibility, because they did not warn students of the potential pitfalls, but why should they, when they thought that they were doing a good job? An 18 or 19-year-old student would not be aware of the General Osteopathic Council's internal politics and would not think to ask whether the course would exist in two or three years. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) says that some osteopathic students at Nescot college have approached him because accreditation of their course has been opposed and badly handled. I suspect that that issue affects more than just the osteopaths who are fighting the system at the moment.

I ask the Minister thoroughly to investigate the matter. I should like to know how the students will be compensated for having been the victims of false pretences. Some have paid many thousands of pounds for their courses and are severely in debt with no qualifications and nowhere to go. I have no doubt that other professional bodies will face the same process. The issues must be considered so that we can learn from any mistakes, whoever made them.

In summary, the General Osteopathic Council has tried to do a good job. I am reassured that the public can consult an osteopath in the knowledge that he or she will be a professional who has passed the scrutiny of the profession and is practising according to the standards laid down by that professional body. There is a clear distinction. I am not saying that those who have not been accepted for accreditation are not excellent practitioners in their own right.

Mr. Gale: Does the hon. Lady accept that many practitioners, including some who have been quoted this morning, are eminent and reputable and have stated clearly that they do not consider that the processes are a sensible measure of efficacy or safety?

Sandra Gidley: No process could cover that fully and there would have been problems whatever process had been implemented. Years of practice do not mean that someone is fit to continue—we often see instances in the medical profession of people who were accredited years ago and are subsequently struck off, so it is only right and proper that everyone is considered afresh. Any professional who wants to continue being a member of a professional body should willingly submit to the required process. None the less, I am willing to acknowledge the concerns about the way in which the matter has been handled, because I believe that the Minister will address the matter.

I end by quoting an immortal line from "Star Trek": Bones said to Jim, "Captain, we mustn't leave him at the mercy of 20th century medicine". With safeguards now in place, 21st century osteopathy is trying to go forward. Whether it has succeeded is for others to decide.

11.58 am

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): Perhaps you would put me right, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on how you should be addressed. Did I understand correctly that we should change to using your name at 12 noon?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: At 12 noon, I shall concede the Chair to Mrs. Ray Michie, who is hovering ready to displace me. She should then be addressed as Madam Chairman or Mrs. Michie.

Mrs. Spelman: Thank you for your clarification, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I sought it because this is a traditional place and one wishes to abide by the procedures.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on securing the debate. I know that other hon. Members had tried hard to obtain a debate on osteopathy, so it has come not a moment too soon. In fact, it comes too late for many osteopaths, who are now unable to practise without incurring penalties, as the hon. Lady rightly said.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale), who revealed a veritable clutch of examples from other hon. Members who had been approached by their constituents, illustrating how widespread the concern is and how much hon. Members have sought to have this debate.

The difficulty was revealed in the line taken by the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley), because it depends a little on whom one talks to. The problem for us as Members of Parliament—who are, with the best will in the world, jacks of all trades—is to try to get to the bottom of the matter. However, one does not have to be a rocket scientist to work out that there is a problem if there are about 4,500 osteopaths and only 2,500 of them are registered. The General Osteopathic Council said in a briefing document that there is no smoke without fire, so I think that even it would acknowledge that there is a problem.

The difficulty for us is to ascertain the scale of the problem. The General Osteopathic Council told me that there were only a few disgruntled osteopaths. However, when one speaks to some of those few, one realises that their number may be up in the thousands. We do not know. I urge the Minister to try to establish—as part of the review that is essential to how the profession is regulated—how many people have been rejected from registration and to estimate how many have failed to register, however difficult that might be.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet referred to the high degree of consensus and to consensus meetings taking place when the profession was examining implementation of the Act. Something must now be seriously wrong, however, as that consensus has obviously broken down. Otherwise, why would qualified practitioners fail to apply for registration? Something must be wrong and, when our constituents turn to us for help, it is our responsibility to try to get to the bottom of the process.

I endorse the argument that there is nothing wrong with the Osteopaths Act. Indeed, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), who was responsible for its introduction as a private Member's Bill. However, a careful reading of the Act and of the statutory instruments that followed it, leads even a lay person to see a divergence from where the spirit of the Act started to where the statutory instruments have taken it.

The Act shows an inclusive approach consistent with the consensual meetings that took place at the time of its introduction. However, the raft of statutory instruments that have followed it seem to get further and further away from that inclusive approach. Indeed, one of the latest statutory instruments—SI 251, which was introduced on 13 April this year—is severe in its final say over someone's ability to practise. On the transitional arrangements for registration—nothing to do with a person's conduct subsequent to registration—it is very harsh. It states:

> Where an applicant has exhausted his rights of appeal and accordingly no further appeal against an appeal decision or a decision refusing permission to appeal is possible,

this will be the final decision disallowing appeal. No door is open, under the statutory instruments, if an applicant is unsuccessful in the registration procedure.

In the first instance, there is a right of appeal to the General Osteopathic Council, but we have heard enough today to place a question mark over how well that appeals process is working and how much confidence potential applicants have in it. If that appeal is unsuccessful, under the statutory instruments a failed applicant can go to the High Court. However, that is expensive. We have heard about the cost of training as an osteopath and about the situation of someone whose application has been refused, who cannot practise and therefore has no income. Such a person might think twice about a High Court action, but there is nowhere else for them to go. That is not in the inclusive spirit of the 1993 Act, which is why I support calls for a public inquiry into what has gone wrong.

As hon. Members pointed out, osteopathy is the first of a series of professions that are allied to medicine that is taking the path of self-regulation. Therefore, it is important that grandfathering should be seen to work, but the grandfathering process is not working very well in osteopathy. That is likely to become an issue as other professions take a similar approach, wishing to protect their titles and to allow a period of time during which practitioners can gain registration. In some other disciplines of alternative medicine or complementary therapies, there may be two schools of thought between classicists and modernists. This is a test case for getting the process right so that the public can see that it works properly and confidence can be restored to practitioners, who feel aggrieved at present. For that reason alone, this debate has important implications for the way in which the Government's work goes forward.

I urgently appeal to the Government for a review and inquiry. Since May, a large number of people have not been in a position to practise in the profession for which they trained and have therefore been unable to obtain an income stream based on their qualifications and experience. For their sakes, it is important for the Government to act promptly to review what is going on.

12.7 pm

The Minister for Public Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on her success in securing a debate on this subject. I listened with great care to the points that were made. It has been an interesting debate, which has highlighted one of the strengths of Westminster Hall—that hon. Members are able to discuss such matters in considerable detail and raise their concerns with the Government. I will reflect on and investigate the matters that were raised; in many cases I would not wish to give a hasty response.

Before I deal with those concerns, I shall set out some of the principles behind the operation of the Osteopaths Act 1993 and why the Government strongly support them. Although all hon. Members who contributed to the debate clearly endorsed the principle of statutory self-regulation, their views about the importance of the underlying issues appear to vary.

[Yvette Cooper]

We strongly support the principle of statutory self-regulation—not only for osteopaths, but for other health professionals—and wish it to be extended, if possible, to other areas of complementary and alternative medicine, as the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) suggested. The key principle is that of protection for patients—in terms not only of safety and competence, but of patients' understanding of what they are getting, of the standards that the professional who is treating them has achieved and of what the regulatory framework should be.

The purpose of statutory self-regulation is to have nationwide, specially-set independent standards—where the profession itself sets the standards because it is best placed to establish what those standards are—and to ensure both that there is a proper mechanism for enforcing those standards and that people are up to the standards that the profession has set. The public will then know exactly what they are getting when they seek treatment.

We have said that we want to improve statutory self-regulation across the board. That is why, last November, the Government issued a consultation paper, "Supporting Doctors, Protecting Patients", which sets out our desire to help the small minority of doctors whose performance gave cause for concern. However, it also contains proposals to improve the regulation of all health professions and makes clear our belief that regulatory bodies should put patients firmly at the centre of their activities. That includes involving more lay members in their governance and focusing on patient interests above professional interests. It means establishing transparent disciplinary and complaints procedures and clear and effective accountability mechanisms and setting high standards to ensure the on-going clinical competence of practitioners. It also means being demonstrably objective in administering those standards and responding to change.

The national health service plan reiterates the Government's determination to protect patients by strengthening and modernising professional self-regulation across the entire field. We have set out the need to make such improvements, including the establishment of the UK council of health regulators, which will provide better co-ordination and a framework for improving regulation across the board. Against that backdrop, I will reflect on the points that were made this morning.

Mrs. Spelman: I am interested in what the Minister is saying about the importance of lay membership. According to the consultation document, the envisaged membership split of the new health professions council is 12 practitioners to 11 lay members. How does that compare with the General Osteopathic Council, which will have similar status?

Yvette Cooper: It is exactly those areas that we will need to look at in greater detail. We have talked about the importance of increasing lay membership in respect of regulation and improving the focus on patients. As those fields develop and as discussions on improving regulation take place across the board—rather than for a particular health profession—we must consider such factors.

I doubt whether all those who object to what is happening would necessarily sign up to some of the important principles embodied in statutory self-regulation. We need to recognise that, as the hon. Member for Romsey said, it is not easy for a health profession to move from voluntary to statutory regulation. Inevitably, some will be unhappy with the entire concept of statutory self-regulation. They will see it as a form of interference and scrutiny by a statutory body that they have never experienced in their practising lives. There will be some whose practice does not match the standards that the profession has set and others whose practice may be excellent but does not match standards in osteopathy.

During the transition—before new procedures for establishing the council are in place and when the council members remain those appointed by the previous Government, rather than the profession itself—some will question the council's legitimacy. The important question arises of the matters with which statutory self-regulation should be concerned. The hon. Member for Salford asked whether it should be concerned with safety and competence or the philosophy of osteopathy. Clearly, it must deal with safety and competence, but existing measures contained in consumer protection, trades description and health and safety legislation provide protection for consumers and patients. However, it must also deal with standards in osteopathy.

Under statutory self-regulation, it must also be the case that it is for the profession to determine what those standards should be. This is about protecting the title of osteopath; it is not about preventing people from offering therapy. Clearly, it is far better if the profession can achieve complete consensus about what it means to practise osteopathy and to produce core standards in osteopathy to which everyone should sign up.

Ms Blears: I entirely accept that there will be standards as well as competence and safety. Competence and safety act as a safety net and above that there will be standards to be reached. The Minister also said that the profession should be seen to be demonstrably objective in implementing those standards. From what she has heard in the debate, would she agree that whether there is demonstrable objectivity in implementing those standards causes us great concern?

Yvette Cooper: I certainly want to look into the questions that my hon. Friend raised about people sending in identical forms and getting different responses. However, I disagree with some of the arguments, in particular that of the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale). I do not accept that everyone who practises or uses a particular title should be able to continue to do so, even if they have been practising under that title for many years.

Mr. Gale: I did not make that point; it is being made very forcefully indeed by senior members of the osteopathic profession following the meetings at the Gay Hussar. It was upon that agreed basis that the

General Osteopathic Council was established. Had it not been on that basis, they would not have agreed to it and they represent 40 per cent. of the profession.

Yvette Cooper: Whoever is making the point, be they members of the profession or Members of Parliament, we do not agree that it is an essential principle behind statutory self-regulation that everyone who has been practising under a title should continue to do so, even if they have been serving for a long time. We are moving towards increased revalidation of all health professionals. That means that health professionals should not simply be judged on the basis of qualifications achieved a long time ago or on the basis of how they define themselves. We judge all our health professionals on the basis of continuing competence to practise. Those are the principles behind the use of a PPP. Those are the principles behind judging people on the basis of competence to practise and not simply on the basis of qualifications achieved a long time ago.

I understand that there is opposition to that principle. I accept that but I back those principles strongly because the principle of revalidation is important. It will affect some people who have perhaps studied for many years or who have practised for many years or who may have been popular with patients or who have never received any complaints against them and have never had any questions raised about their safety. However, it would be inappropriate for Ministers to say whether those individuals met the core standards for osteopathy. That must be a matter for a proper regulatory framework and for the GOsC to consider. Individuals should not simply decide themselves whether they meet those standards; otherwise we might as well not have a statutory self-regulation framework at all. It is clearly appropriate for the Government to take a view on the overall approach to regulation. It is in that context that I want to reflect further on many of the points that have been made.

Considerable consultation took place before the 1993 Act was introduced. The approach was first to establish the new General Osteopathic Council. From next year, members of the GOsC will be elected. The previous Government made the appointments and the transitional arrangements. The hon. Member for Romsey asked about the process for appointing those members. Because it was done under the previous Government I will go back and look at the procedures that were in place. I am assured that they were in line with the Osteopaths Act and with the public appointments procedures of the day, but I will investigate that further.

The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) made it clear during the passage of the Osteopaths Bill that the initial members of the GOsC should be chosen, not to represent particular osteopathic organisations or schools, but on the basis of individual merit and their ability to act as ambassadors for the profession as well. The then Government's criteria for selecting the most suitable candidates did not include the need to represent particular osteopathic bodies.

The statutory rules that the GOsC has drafted at each stage to govern its functions were carefully scrutinised by Government solicitors to ensure that they had legal propriety and were compliant with the Osteopaths Act before the Privy Council approved them. As the House will be aware, all statutory instruments are also scrutinised by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. It has not identified any significant problems with the rules that the GOsC has prepared.

The GOsC is obliged to publish core standards as part of the Osteopaths Act, which again must be the right thing to do. The core standards proposed were the standard of proficiency based on the statement of minimum standards given in the King's Fund report and also on the subsequent 1993 document "Competences Required for Osteopathic Practice", which had been commended by the British Medical Association. I am not clear from the debate whether hon. Members are concerned about the content of that standard of proficiency, the definition of the core standards and the process that the GOsC has gone through to define them, or about the implementation of those standards. Unless any hon. Member corrects me, I shall assume that the concern surrounds the implementation of those standards rather than their definition.

The purpose of setting those core standards is to have a framework to decide who can practise as an osteopath and how to set up a register for osteopathy. The statutory register for osteopaths was formally opened in May 1998, which marked the beginning of a two-year transitional period during which existing osteopaths could apply for registration. Although the Osteopaths Act gave the GOsC the power retrospectively to recognise osteopathic qualifications for the purpose of registration during that period, it chose not to do so. I am informed that that was because it thought it would be difficult, if not impossible, for qualifications that were granted many years before, by institutions that in many cases had ceased to exist, to be properly verified. I understand that it also felt that it would not allow consideration to be given to those who had not undertaken formal qualifications at an early stage, but had gone through apprenticeship or other routes and other forms of personal and professional development. It certainly seems valid to set up a process that allows different routes in.

The GOsC chose to use the professional profile and portfolio as the basis of applications and in some cases that was supplemented by an interview and test of clinical competence. The Government were not involved in that decision and the principle of the PPP is in keeping with the approach to increasing revalidation. I will take up the points that have been made about the interpretation of this and about many people submitting identical forms. I will write to my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and other hon. Members who have raised specific points about this issue.

Clearly, to prove to the public and to patients that people have gone through appropriate statutory regulation, a proper framework must be in place. We should not simply accept the judgment and the self-description that people have used in the past.

Within the statutory scheme, transitional arrangements to register existing practitioners have come to an end. The Osteopaths Act 1993 established a transitional period ending on the second anniversary of the opening of the statutory register. Since 9 May, no one has been able to make a new application for registration using the transitional provisions.

[Yvette Cooper]

Hon. Members have asked about transparency and an appeals process. There is a right of appeal through the courts after the right of appeal to the General Osteopathic Council has been exercised. Proper procedure involving transparency and accountability is necessary, but a proper regulatory framework requires a final decision to be taken. It is important for the credibility of the profession that the General Osteopathic Council can demonstrate that it is responding and that its processes are transparent and accountable. I am glad that it has been willing to meet hon. Members who have raised concerns. I hope that that will continue. It is important that the council should respond directly to concerns raised by Members of Parliament.

Some hon. Members referred to the number of people who do or do not apply for registration. The latest figures that I have show that of the 4,247 practitioners on the GOsC's database who could have made a claim that they were osteopaths, 2,442 have now been registered and a further 749 are having their applications assessed. That means that 75 per cent. of those claiming to be osteopaths have either registered or applied for registration. In addition, I am informed that 142 are likely to have been denied registration by the end of the process and 591 have chosen not to register. I am informed that many of those are due to retire from practice or are practising overseas and are not required to register. I thought it important to put those numbers on the record.

Mr. Gale: The Minister has pointed out several times that the previous Government approved the body, but she is incorrect. It was approved by the Privy Council, which is non partisan. That is relevant, because she spoke of its being re-elected in a year's time. She is right, it will be. However, it will be re-elected only by registered osteopaths, which means that, according to her figures, 25 per cent. of members of the profession, who by implication will not be registered will not have the right to vote. The GOsC will then become, in its present form, self-perpetuating.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the process ultimately goes through the Privy Council, but the appointments procedure took place under the previous Government. He is also right to say that the election will be by registered osteopaths. I take the comments that have been made about the appointments process seriously, which is why I responded to the hon. Member for Romsey by saying that I would look into it.

Hon. Members also mentioned education and qualifications and those people who, having gone through the education process, are not likely—in the short term at least—to receive a qualification because their organisation has not yet been recognised by the GOsC. Colleges have a contractual responsibility to their students and a responsibility not to mislead them. I understand that the GOsC has no statutory responsibility for students in colleges where the qualifications are not recognised, but I am also informed that it is working with those colleges to try to find a way forward with respect to the validating process.

I shall further consider the matters that were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Salford about obtaining information and support from the GOsC about alternative places at which to gain qualifications, should those initially obtained be turned down. I take the points that have been raised very seriously. I will look into them further, but the fundamental principle that statutory regulation is right, and that it must be achieved by a rigorous process rather than self-definition, is important.

Economic Development (Sunderland)

12.30 pm

Mr. Fraser Kemp (Houghton and Washington, East): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate economic development in Sunderland, the city that I am proud to represent. Economic development spearheaded by local authorities is the cornerstone of the strategies that the United Kingdom needs to develop. Without an effective strategy for economic development, we are disadvantaged and unable to do the things that are necessary to build sustainable futures for our communities.

The demise of our shipbuilding and mining industries means that the economic base of the area I represent has undergone a more dramatic transformation than has been seen anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Those industries provided employment for the vast majority of people in the area, not just for the past few decades, but for centuries. If people 20 or 30 years ago had been asked what future they envisaged for the city of Sunderland without mining or shipbuilding, the response would have been bleak.

It is a tribute to people's talent and ingenuity that Sunderland has not become an economic wasteland. In the 20 or 30 years in which we have lost our core, primary industries, not only have we have attracted new industries to the area, but we have developed our indigenous manufacturing industries. With much work and effort, we have not only responded to the change, but managed and embraced it. We have been ahead of the game, looking to the future of new industries that are developing in the United Kingdom. In recent years, Sunderland city council and its economic development team have been consistent winners of various awards for the area, including the best economic development area in the United Kingdom, top location in the United Kingdom for sites and premises, and the United Kingdom's most successful regeneration city. Those awards, which have been achieved in difficult circumstances, serve as a tribute to the local authority and the people who work with it.

A report issued a few weeks ago by *Business Strategies* described Sunderland as one of the few cities that are genuinely bucking the trend with respect to manufacturing industries. That message is hammered home by the fact that my constituency contains the most successful car plant in Europe: the Nissan car plant is the most efficient in Europe in terms of production per worker per car. Regrettably, the task of getting that message across was not helped by a press release that I saw yesterday. Under the heading, "Conservative News", the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) announced:

> The news that Nissan will not invest for the new Micra at Sunderland is another body blow for the British motor industry.

If that were true, there would be a problem, but it is not: Nissan has not yet made a decision on whether to build the new Micra in Sunderland. Nevertheless, the statement gave cause for concern.

Any right hon. or hon. Member who issues a press statement about another hon. Member's constituency should check with that Member, or at least with the company concerned. That press release has caused great anxiety to tens of thousands of people and their families. Yesterday, I spoke to the managing director of Nissan, who confirmed that no final decision had been made. It is regrettable that people are willing to jump on any bandwagon to promote bad news, even when it does not really exist. The issue of such a press release throughout the region caused much pain and anxiety to those who work at the car plant. The right hon. Member for Wokingham would be better employed working with the rest of us to try to secure jobs at Nissan in the production of the new Micra, and supporting the Department of Trade and Industry's award of £40 million to Nissan, which is currently being examined by the European Commissioner for Competition. We expect an announcement from him at the end of the year. The right hon. Gentleman should support the retention of jobs in the north-east, not condemn job losses that have not even happened.

Although much has been achieved in recent years, I am not complacent. I realise that we cannot ease off. We live in a global environment and in a changing world, so it is important to maintain the pace of change. We must respond not only to the situation as it stands, but be ahead of the game and identify the new industries that areas such as the north-east can attract. My constituency is predominantly made up of former coal mining areas and we must recognise the deprivation and lack of opportunity that persists within such areas.

Many schemes have been undertaken. A few weeks ago, we were successful in respect of a multimillion-pound bid called Urban II, which is designed to increase opportunities for people who live in former coal mining areas in respect of training, literacy and child care. That offers the chance to take a big step forward. We must not forget those communities. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has carried out much work and the Government have given help through coalfield regeneration programmes, such as the Coalfields Trust, but we must keep up the momentum. One of the big moral judgments that the Government will face at the end of their current term of office and the next will be whether they have made a material difference to people who live in former coalmining areas.

I ask the Minister to use her good offices to chase up one or two matters, the first of which is the reclamation of the Lambton cokeworks, which date from the beginning of the 18th century. The area the works occupy has been heavily contaminated by the process of making coke, one product of which is cyanide. The land is badly polluted and it is important that we look for ways in which it can be reclaimed. Reclamation would allow a new road to be built across the land, which would open up both existing industrial estates and others that are planned. It would provide a link between the A1M and the A19 and open up a whole range of opportunities, not only in my constituency, but in neighbouring former coal mining constituencies. There would be a considerable effect on the whole area.

One NorthEast, through the English Partnerships coalfield programme, currently has consultants looking at that issue, but we would like a decision to be reached as soon as possible and funds to be made available. The site was purchased by the local authority some time ago, with a view to reclaiming the cokeworks. Incidentally, during work on the site, Britain's oldest wooden

[Mr. Fraser Kemp]

wagonway, dating from 1730, was unearthed. It would be of great advantage to receive news of any action that is to be taken.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is considering proposals relating to the Sunderland area regeneration compact, commonly known as the ARC, which the local authority is keen to see expedited. The project covers the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for Sunderland, North (Mr. Etherington) and for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It is one of the largest projects of its kind in Europe—a joint public-private partnership initiative that would develop the corridor surrounding the River Wear. The project has the full support of One NorthEast, English Partnerships, the local authority and everybody in Wearside. Anything we can do to get a decision on the proposals would be helpful, because the project would provide opportunities and jobs, not only in Sunderland, North and South, but in Houghton and Washington, East.

I would like the Minister to bear the points I have made in mind. My area has suffered blows in the past, but it is fighting back effectively, and I have said how successful local manufacturing has been. There are many important initiatives taking place: for example, a couple of Fridays ago, I visited a project called G-Tel, which gives young people opportunities through the new deal; of the 70 trainees in the Washington Galleries—part of the G-Tel project—30 are now in full-time employment. That project was put together and developed by the Department for Education and Employment, the Galleries training centre and the Prudential, and has been very successful.

A lot of effort has been put into giving people the necessary training, but we have to provide the infrastructure for jobs, so the city council's work to develop sites and build factories is crucial. If we can develop in that way—and we can—we need never witness the waste of human talent that we saw in the reign of the previous Government, during the 1980s and early 1990s, when the people in our constituencies had little hope and few opportunities. The situation is beginning to improve and my message today is that we must keep the momentum going.

12.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp) on securing the debate. He knows the north-east region and the city of Sunderland well, and has clearly outlined for us the issues that that area of the country has faced over the past two decades and still faces to some extent.

Since 1997, we have tried to provide new opportunities for a regionally focused approach to tackling some of those problems. The organisations, communities, individuals and authorities in the north-east have already responded positively to the challenge of taking an increased part in the approach to the economic and social progress of the region, and of Sunderland in particular. Business people, local authorities and voluntary sector groups are all involved to various extents in plans and activities and the Government's regionalisation programme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Washington, East and other hon. Friends, some of whom are in the Chamber today, have played an important role in supporting and taking forward all those efforts. However, he is also right to celebrate the strength of the city of Sunderland and the north-east. I understand the feelings that he expressed clearly about the behaviour of some Members, who are apparently prepared to sacrifice the concerns and expectations for the future of local people by pursuing a soundbite with no substance in the context of what Nissan has said. He has outlined the work that the Government are doing to secure, through the Commission, a satisfactory outcome to the decision by Nissan. We are confident that the Commission is dealing with that in a timely way and we look forward to its results.

Before I come to the issues that my hon. Friend wants me to address, I shall refer to several initiatives that we have introduced and in which the partners in the region, particularly in Sunderland, have been involved. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions, who has had to leave the Chamber, took part in the launch of the regional economic strategy developed on behalf of the region by One NorthEast. My right hon. Friend is working closely with One NorthEast and its partners. That strategy outlines the issues, and the opportunities, faced by the north-east. The long-term strategy of One NorthEast is ambitious but achievable.

The region has a new assisted area map, providing various forms of grants, which covers about 97 per cent. of the region's population. The Government have made a bid for a new programme of European objective 2 structural funds up to 2006, which will be worth more than £460 million to the area and will support spending of around £1 billion. Several sub-regional partnerships will bring together local authorities, businesses, learning and skills councils, small business services and so on, all trying to work together to make sure—the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Washington, East—that those opportunities and resources are translated in ways that make a real difference for people. My hon. Friend is right that the final test is not the money that goes in but what we make that money, and other resources and efforts, achieve; that depends largely on local partners.

My hon. Friend will know that the neighbourhood renewal fund was launched with a consultation paper earlier in October. The city of Sunderland is one of 14 authorities in the north-east that will be eligible for assistance and, provided that it complies with the conditions for that funding, it stands to receive an extra £14.3 million over the next three financial years. I know that my hon. Friend will be pleased with that. The neighbourhood renewal fund in particular will assist local authorities and others working together to bridge the gap between the poorest communities and those that have had higher standards of services and economic well-being.

The single regeneration budget has also played a crucial role in Sunderland and the region. In its work to develop economic activity and regeneration in

Sunderland, One NorthEast is funding five single regeneration partnerships from the first five rounds. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that after the announcement of round six in August this year, a new partnership to regenerate Thorney Close will receive more than £10 million over the next six years. Again, those are important strands that need to be brought together to assist the various forms of regeneration, not just economic but social and environmental.

My hon. Friend mentioned two issues on which I would like to comment. The first was the area regeneration compact, or the ARC as it is known locally. As he said, that initiative was launched in June last year in response to job losses and closures in Sunderland at Grove's Cranes and the brewery. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry recently considered the development strategy for ARC and earlier this week responded to Dr. John Bridge, the chairperson of One NorthEast, welcoming the strategy and encouraging ARC to press ahead with its economic and financial appraisal work. I say clearly to my hon. Friend that the Government believe that the proposals in the compact document are in line with the regional strategy of One NorthEast and with the forthcoming urban White Paper.

The Secretary of State has asked the task group to press ahead with the important necessary economic and financial appraisal work. It is important that the compact should provide the basis for the kind of public-private partnership that we know to be the most effective way to achieve sustainable regeneration, and, as my hon. Friend said, that would place Sunderland ahead of the game. That is the critical task. He will be reassured to know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing—I do not want to compromise her—is now leading on the development of ARC, in agreement with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

I know that my hon. Friend has worked extremely hard liasing with One NorthEast and others to try to ensure funding for reclamation of the Lambton cokeworks. It is an important scheme that he knows will cost £12 million or more, and it will see productive re-use of brownfield land. Clearly, that would hit one of the Government's priorities. Studies have to be undertaken to validate the proposals and there must be separate economic assessments to justify what is, as he would agree, significant expenditure. One NorthEast wants those to proceed as rapidly as possible. It is committed to try to finish them in the next four to six months, after which time it should be possible to confirm the source of funding and a programme for reclamation of the site. I cannot give my hon. Friend an absolute guarantee today, but I hope that I have been as reassuring as possible and that he will take some encouragement from that.

I should also like to comment on the city of Sunderland partnership. Of all the issues that my hon. Friend raised, partnership is the most crucial to getting the maximum from the resources available and ensuring that they are translated into changes that make a difference to local people. The Government can do only so much. Since I have been a Minister it has been clear that, although the Government's job is to make resources, structures and mechanisms available, local people have to translate money and opportunities into economic and social progress, with our support.

I congratulate the council on its forward thinking and approach to partnership working, which are critical. The city of Sunderland partnership, which has brought together key players in the city, was established in 1994 and has operated a strategic planning process that includes a city strategy. The partnership clearly provides a solid base for the Government's modernisation agenda, and is placed to become the local strategic partnership that will finalise the preparation of the city's community strategy and the priorities for utilising, for example, the neighbourhood renewal fund. It will also drive forward economic regeneration for the city.

Mr. Kemp: On the question of former coal-mining areas, I want to make one plea. We often hear about such areas, and there is rightly talk of Yorkshire and Durham, but it is not often remembered that there is a substantial coal-mining area, formerly the north Durham field, in the city of Sunderland.

I want to mention a collegiate approach, using joined-up government, to the issues facing former coal-mining areas. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that in some sense we have to look broadly in terms of social provision, education, transport facilities and equipping people with basic skills? Is that not one of the great benefits of the Urban II project, for which we have funding in mining areas? For example, it will provide child care, which will help women to find work again. We must see matters in terms of not only the factory unit, but providing a social infrastructure around people to give them chances and opportunities.

Ms Hughes: I agree that that is critical. Change is unsustainable unless we pay attention to the development of that infrastructure and to other issues such as how to raise the skills and capacities of local people. That is the distinctive contribution that the Government have made, which local partners such as Sunderland have understood and are taking forward. If we do not pay attention to all the issues mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Washington, East, including training, child care, housing and transport, change may die away when the initiative ends. We will not have created a change that lasts and makes a difference to people—the difference will last only as long as the initiative.

My hon. Friend referred to transport. The Government recognise, as does the city of Sunderland, that local economists depend on good strategic links to markets in the United Kingdom and Europe. Transport infrastructure is especially important in the north-east. Construction of the Metro extension is under way and will offer improved transport links within Sunderland and with the rest of the Tyne and Wear conurbation. The £100 million extension will help to provide employment opportunities and access to those opportunities as well as to social, leisure and educational facilities. In addition to the Metro, a local transport plan is being developed that will use a proportion of the £50 billion that we are making available nationally to support some local priorities in partnership.

The Government have applied a range of tools and opportunities to enable people at the regional and local levels to begin to tackle some of the problems in the north-east and Sunderland. Some of those schemes are

[Ms Hughes]

active and producing results, while others are in the process of development. The aim must be to tackle some of the long-term and deep-seated economic and social issues that exist largely as a consequence of the fact that little attention was paid to them in previous decades when, as my hon. Friend rightly says, a changing economic situation faced the north-east. Those issues cannot be addressed with quick fixes.

It is important that local players can see that the resources and opportunities that we are providing will be continued long enough to make real change possible. I have been encouraged by the response of regional and local players; I have commented on the ARC and on the positive approach of the city of Sunderland partnership, which provides a basis for making the most of those opportunities. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Washington, East was right to say that the critical test lies in ensuring that as much value as possible comes from the money and opportunities provided and that a real difference is made over the next few years for the people of Sunderland and the north-east. I am sure that he will play his part in that. The extent to which regional and local players have grasped those opportunities and are trying to make that difference is encouraging.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Thank you. We may now go on to the next debate.

Central Railway

12.58 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I am glad to be able to raise an issue that has recently caused considerable concern to my constituents.

I acknowledge that the Central Railway problem is not new: since 1995, when the original route was proposed, many hon. Members have had to deal with the problem of the Central Railway proposal. In July 1996, an application made under the Transport and Works Act 1992 was overwhelmingly defeated in the House, which put paid to the original project proposal for a route alignment through London. In July 2000, the company announced a new proposed route that would go around London, following the M25 in the south-western quadrant. My interest and that of several of my colleagues who, unfortunately, cannot be present today has been awakened by the proposal to route the project through our constituencies.

I should like to place on record anxieties that are shared by my hon. Friends the Members for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) and for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire), who could not be present today. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), the chairman of the all-party group on blight, who has shown a great interest in the matter, for his guidance and assistance in formulating my response to the proposals affecting my constituency. I suspect that he might try to catch your eye later in the debate, Mrs. Michie.

A measure of the anxiety about the effect that the proposal will have on my constituency can be derived from the fact that, shortly after the project was announced in July 2000, a local lobby group—which, ironically, was originally set up to fight the proposed link roads alongside the M25—called a meeting of those who would be affected by the proposal, who were almost precisely the same people who would have been blighted for a decade or so by the link road proposals; the meeting was so well attended that not all the people who came along could fit in the hall, and some had to listen to a loudspeaker outside the hall. Hundreds of people displayed genuine anxiety.

The announcement of the project and the new route around the south-western quadrant of the M25 gives rise to several serious questions, many of which have been asked before, during the debate on the previous proposals. They relate to the engineering viability of the railway project proposed, the financial strength of the promoter of the project and the financial viability of the project itself—in short, the merits and demerits. Valid and important questions also arise about how compensation is calculated and when it becomes payable to people affected by such a project, if it proceeds. However, my purpose today is not to explore those aspects. I shall focus on the iniquity of a system that allows thousands of homes to be blighted without compensation, with no timetable for resolution and no apparent means of redress for those affected. I am glad to say that I do not perceive the debate as party political. I hope that I shall be able to appeal to notions of common sense and the sense of natural justice that is shared throughout the House.

I do not pretend to be an expert on the operation of the Transport and Works Act. However, I understand—I am sure that the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—that a company that makes a formal application under the Act is vulnerable from that point in time to being required to purchase properties and pay compensation to those who are blighted by the application. However, there is no requirement to proceed to a formal application: a project can be announced, producing an effective blight, without there being any requirement to proceed. The draft Transport and Works Act procedures, which the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has out for consultation, put great store in the need for prior consultation between the promoter and those who will be affected. That is fine, but those involved need to be sensitive about the cost faced by people who are blighted during an extended pre-application period.

In the case of Central Railway's current proposal, there is little to consult on and nothing worthy of the name "consultation" is happening. Few details of the project have been made known, which leaves people whose properties are affected guessing, for example, the height of the railway and whether it will go over or under different existing transport infrastructures. The existing system disincentivises a speculative promoter of a scheme to proceed with a Transport and Works Act application, because from the date of doing so the promoter is liable to make compensation payments.

Currently, a private company can announce a major infrastructure project, imposing an instant blight on the homes in its path; there is no evaluation of the merits of the project, no evaluation of the company's financial capability, no procedure for forcing the project to be submitted to proper scrutiny within any time scale, and no accountability because, unlike a public body making such proposals, a private company is accountable to no one but its own shareholders. Meanwhile, in their responses to local searches, local authorities through whose area the proposed project will run have to reveal to potential purchasers of property the existence of the proposals—thus making the sale of property difficult, or possible only at a discount to its true market value.

At best, the procedure can mean a protracted blight with no access to compensation; at worst, it can be abused. I do not suggest that that is what is happening in the case of the Central Railway proposal, but the present procedures contain nothing that would prevent an unscrupulous promoter from blighting an area with a view to purchasing property cheaply while the blight prevails. It is clear to me that the system is inadequate to deal with large-scale projects, especially linear projects such as a railway, which are promoted on a speculative basis by a private company.

I want to place on the record that I am not against big infrastructure projects in principle, nor am I against their being promoted by private companies. However, the lack of accountability and any form of redress for the victims of the blight that an announcement of such a project inevitably produces, and the inability of anyone other than the promoter to ensure that a scheme is subjected within a reasonable time scale to a proper analysis of its merits by a proper process in a proper forum offends my sense of natural justice and, I hope, that of others, too.

The timetable for the Central Railway proposal is not yet clear, but common sense and a little analysis suggests that, after what happened to the previous Transport and Works Act application in 1996, it is highly unlikely that the company intends to proceed with a formal application before the next general election. Only the Prime Minister knows precisely when that will be, but there is a significant possibility that a further 12 months or so will pass before there is any likelihood of a formal application being made by the company.

There is obviously a problem when the law allows a small, loss-making private company to announce a scheme that will blight thousands of homes and then, if it so wishes, to do absolutely nothing at all—perhaps for years. From private discussions, I know that several Labour Members—indeed, several Ministers—sympathise with my constituents' concerns, but sympathy, while much appreciated, will not solve the problem. We urgently need a change in the law. It would be a minor and uncontroversial change that could be dealt with in a private Member's Bill, but we cannot rely on a Member concerned about the issue being fortunate in the ballot. I hope that the Minister will assure us today that he will give due consideration to early legislative intervention in Government time to resolve the problem.

How might the law be changed? How might we deal with the problems that my constituents face? The Government clearly have more expert resources than I have to consider those questions, but I should like to mention some suggestions that have either been made to me or have sprung to my mind. One option would be that a promoter should face an obligation to pay compensation from the time of a project's announcement, but I do not favour that proposal because I do not want to stifle innovative infrastructure projects, which I fear that the introduction of compensation from the first announcement would do.

Fixed timetables for applications under the Transport and Works Act 1992 could be introduced, but that would risk over-rigidity. The simplest, fairest and most flexible approach would be to give individuals affected by blight, including local authorities in which projects would run, the right to apply to the court for a timetabling order, following the announcement but before a formal application. That would give the courts the power to require either the submission of an application under the 1992 Act within a certain period, which would vary, or the withdrawal of the proposal followed by a lockout period in which it could not be re-announced. The court would consider the harm suffered by those blighted, the degree of active consultation and the prima facie viability of the scheme and the promoter, and seek to produce a fair timetable that balanced all interests. It would be a tough job, but it would be the proper role of the courts in such matters.

That is merely a suggestion. I do not pretend to have researched the subject exhaustively. Whichever way we proceed, I look to the Minister for a commitment to tackle the scandal of the current system, which can leave anyone at the mercy of any half-baked, under-capitalised, ill-thought-out scheme, however dubious its economics and however unlikely it is to materialise in

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

reality. The system allows a promoter to blight thousands of properties without any individual evaluation of the merits of his proposal, and then allows him to sit back and do nothing if he wants, perhaps for years, without requiring him to pay a penny in compensation. That cannot be right. It would offend anyone's sense of natural justice. I urge the Minister to give an unambiguous commitment to deal with the issue as a matter of the highest priority.

1.13 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) for allowing me a moment to speak in the debate, and to the Minister for being courteous enough to permit it.

The purpose of the debate is to provide relief to a large number of people suffering from an ill that affects an even larger group. We will benefit them more if we listen to what the Government have to say than if I speak at length, so I should simply like to take the opportunity to say clearly how strongly I support my hon. Friend. I once described the situation as "burglar blight", marching across the country robbing all sorts of people of the value of their capital. It is a scandal that requires urgent redress.

1.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) has raised an issue that is of great concern not only to his constituents, but to many other people who live alongside major proposed infrastructure projects.

I should say at the outset that encouraging more rail freight is at the heart of the Government's integrated transport policy and we are committed to working in partnership with the rail industry to achieve that. I am pleased that, after many years of decline, rail freight is on the way up again: rail freight volume has risen by 22 per cent. since April 1997, and by 42 per cent. since privatisation. We look forward to the day, not too far off, when the percentage of freight carried by rail returns to double figures.

The Government have for some time been aware of Central Railway's proposals to build and operate a freight railway between Liverpool and Lille. Although Ministers have received representations from the company and seen some of its publicity material, Central Railway has not formally submitted details of its proposals, as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge said. For reasons that I will make clear, it would be wrong of me to comment substantively on the scheme at this stage. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand that; he did not comment much on the scheme himself.

Before Central Railway could implement any of its proposals, it would need to obtain a wide range of statutory powers and planning permissions. It could obtain these powers and permissions by obtaining an order from the Secretary of State under the Transport and Works Act 1992. Central Railway says that it is preparing to make an application next spring, which is a little sooner than the hon. Gentleman stated. The statutory procedures under the 1992 Act offer all interested persons a full and fair opportunity to have their say. I hope to illustrate that and reassure those who are worried about how Central Railway's scheme will affect them by describing the steps that must be taken in respect of an application.

Procedures under the Act are designed to ensure that all those who should know about an application have reasonable opportunity to find out about it; I presume that most of those who should know about the Central Railway proposal already do so. Applicants are required to publish notice of their application locally and on the site of the proposed works, while those affected by proposals must be individually notified. Furthermore, copies of the application documents must be served on local authorities and other statutory bodies and be made available for public inspection for a minimum of six weeks. Within that period, individuals may make representations to the Secretary of State about the application. When an application is made, the Secretary of State has eight weeks to consider whether the scheme is of national significance. If he decides that it is, the application must be referred to Parliament. The hon. Gentleman is aware that that is what happened with the 1996 proposals.

Where such a decision is taken, a further minimum period must elapse before Parliament can debate the application, to allow time for hon. Members to familiarise themselves with the proposals and allow a chance for lobbying. The process is designed to give both Houses of Parliament the opportunity to debate the principles and policies relating to a scheme before it proceeds to more detailed consideration at a public inquiry. A motion approving the proposals has to be passed by both Houses before an application can proceed to consideration at a public local inquiry. If either House rejects the proposals in principle, the application cannot proceed. The hon. Gentleman will know that rejection of the 1996 proposals led to that application being withdrawn.

If any application made by Central Railway succeeded in securing approval from both Houses, a public inquiry would follow. The aim would be to provide an accessible forum for anyone with an interest in the proposals to present written or oral evidence to an inspector. After the inquiry, the inspector would submit a report to the Secretary of State, including a recommendation on whether the proposal should be approved. However, the final decision rests with the Secretary of State and, in making his decision, he must have regard to all the evidence presented to him. He is not bound to approve a scheme simply because Parliament has previously endorsed it in principle. I cannot comment at this stage on the merits or otherwise of Central Railway's proposals.

Mr. Rowe: One of the peculiarly obnoxious features of the proposal is that it is almost avowed by Central Railway itself that it is managed by men of straw. Do the Government not believe that proposals of such magnitude should at least be backed by some kind of public statement of asset?

Mr. Mullin: I respect the hon. Gentleman's great experience in such matters arising from a project in his area. We shall certainly consider any positive suggestions offered by him or the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, whose suggestions I will touch on at the end of my remarks.

I hope that I have made it clear that, before any decisions are made about the scheme, it will be subjected to thorough and effective examination. No doubt part of that examination will be the financial standing of the backers. Moreover, we would expect a promoter of an order—especially a promoter of such a major scheme—to carry out full and extensive consultations before a formal application was made. My Department's guidance emphasises the importance of thorough pre-application consultation. Such consultation, if carried out constructively and with an open mind, can help promoters to prepare and refine their proposals and may also help to allay unnecessary fears and suspicions that understandably arise when people feel that they are being kept in the dark.

On the issue of property blight, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge will probably be aware that compensatory measures are available to property owners through the Transport and Works Act application procedures.

Mr. Hammond: I did not, I hope, at any time raise the question of what happens after a Transport and Works Act application is made. The Minister suggests that the application under discussion will be made next spring, but I think that it might be much delayed. Will he acknowledge that there is nothing to require an application to be brought forward next spring and can he deal with the problem that will face my constituents in the interim until an application is made?

Mr. Mullin: I intend to address that point. It would be helpful to the hon. Gentleman's constituents to know the procedures, and I hope that, by explaining them today, I shall assist them. I fully understand that the hon. Gentleman has been describing the blight that inevitably arises when such a scheme is even mooted, rather than when a formal application has been made.

Compensation for disturbance and home loss may be payable, while home owners may be entitled to compensation for depreciation in their property values due to physical factors caused by the use of the works, such as noise, fumes, artificial lighting and discharges on to their property. The Government are aware that in the early stages of development and before an application is made, major infrastructure schemes can generate uncertainties that are often regarded as the cause of depreciation in property values. That type of blight, which is not covered by the statutory compensation provisions, is commonly referred to as a generalised or perceived blight. As part of my Department's fundamental review into laws and procedures relating to compulsory purchase and compensation, the Government published a code of practice on the dissemination of information during major infrastructure developments in October 1999. That emanated from a recommendation of the interdepartmental working group on blight, whose approach is commended to private sector promoters of major infrastructure developments. Its aim is to minimise blight.

As part of the same review, an independent advisory group into compulsory purchase and blight compensation was established. It published its final report on 27 July. Comments on the report will be taken into account when preparing the Government's policy paper, which we hope to publish in the new year. My Department will then consult formally on the proposals and I imagine that the hon. Members for Runnymede and Weybridge and for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) will both want to take part in that process.

A further recommendation arising from the blight review was for a property purchase guarantee and compensation scheme, which would offer guarantees of future value for a property, coupled with guarantees in respect of compensation. The purpose would be to help to maintain stability in the local property market. The advisory group endorsed that proposal in its final report, but saw it as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, the statutory blight notice procedure.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge calls for a change in the law, saying that it would be a simple change. In my limited experience, changes in the law never prove to be as simple as they appear when one is sitting on the Back Benches. However, the hon. Gentleman made a very reasonable suggestion. He will appreciate that I cannot give him an answer off the top of my head, but I shall ensure that the matter is passed to those who are in a position to review it.

The issues that the hon. Gentleman identified must first be considered by Central Railway and its partners in the proposed scheme as part of the consultation process. Meanwhile, I would encourage all who have an interest in the proposals to make their views known to the company, so that it can have regard to them when preparing its submission. It will be in the interests of all concerned to ensure that the company's application goes ahead as soon as possible, so that it can be given proper consideration. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Hammond: The Minister mentioned a few moments ago the concept of a property compensation scheme that operates prior to the application being made. Central Railway is operating such a scheme, and my local authority is taking advice on it. Will the Minister tell us whether he is aware of any work done to support the notion that the scheme that is in place underpins the market in an area that would otherwise be blighted? I have been able to find no evidence that it is genuinely effective.

Mr. Mullin: I cannot respond to that point off the top of my head, but I undertake to come back to the hon. Gentleman on the matter.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): Is my hon. Friend the Minister aware that the Central Railway property protection scheme was considered by the interdepartmental working group on blight in December 1997 and was received very favourably by the

[Mr. Kelvin Hopkins]

Department? In my view, it addresses many of the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond).

Mr. Mullin: That is obviously something that we shall have to look at, possibly in the company of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, but it is not something that we can sort out in the final 30 seconds of the debate.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister. We can now move on to the next debate.

Free Miners (Forest of Dean)

1.27 pm

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): Mrs. Michie, I congratulate you on your appointment. I consider myself fortunate to speak while you are in the Chair.

I am pleased to have secured a debate on free mining in the Forest of Dean because it enables me, not only to further the case, but to put the argument on public record. Before setting out their case in this long dispute, I pay tribute to the free miners—the Davids standing against the might of the Goliaths of the Coal Authority and the Government—especially Ray Wright, their secretary, Don Johns, their chairman, Eric Morris, their president, Harold Powell, a fifth-generation free miner, Mike Howells, Gerald Haynes and Mike Jones.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe both for being here today to listen—and, I hope, to give some encouraging news on the issue—and for the time and commitment that she has already given. At my invitation, she kindly visited the Forest of Dean in July to see the Hayners Bailey colliery, where she met the free miners and gave a commitment to look at the issue afresh.

It goes without saying that the Forest of Dean is a unique area. It has its own rich heritage, with its own customs and privileges making up the personality of the community. Mine must be the only constituency that has free miners, verderers and sheep badgers—who are not animals, but men. There has been a history of mining in the area since ancient times, originally for ochres, then for iron, and, in the 19th and 20th centuries, coal. Our area is a recognised coalfields community, with moneys now flowing from Government to assist us in building up our poor infrastructure.

Free mining is different. Free mining rights are custom originating from time out of mind. They were first conferred by Edward I and were incorporated into modern law by Parliament in 1838. They are extended to males born within the hundred of St. Briavels who, when they have reached the age of 21 and have worked a year and a day in a coal or iron mine, become free miners. Those rights can now be inherited and are held by some females.

The Dean Forest (Mines) Act 1838 was the first in a series that culminated in the Forest of Dean (Mines) Act 1904, which series is now referred to collectively as the Dean Forest Mines Enactments. They preserve and recognise, not only the ancient rights, but the special exclusive relationship with the governor and his deputy. The governor grants a gale, which is a Crown award to mine a specific mineral in a specific, recognised area, in a specific, seam at a specific location, on terms.

All subsequent legislation recognised the special status and antiquity of free mining until the Coal Industry Act 1994. When plans for that legislation were announced, free miners were assured by the deputy governor that their situation would not be affected and that special provisions would be made in the usual way to protect their rights—in short, the deputy governor, who controls and regulates free miners, made it clear that their rights would be protected. There was a precedent in previous legislation: free miners were expressly exempt from nationalisation in the Coal Act

1938 and the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act 1946. They felt secure that a precedent had been set and that their rights would be protected.

In 1994, my predecessor, the then hon. Member for Gloucestershire, West, Paul Marland, took his eye off the ball and did not scrutinise the Bill carefully as it passed through both Houses of Parliament. He made no representations to Ministers that the Bill should refer to the Forest of Dean or free miners and their rights. Consequently, the free miners discovered too late that they had lost their rights. There was no consultation with the free miners before or during the passage of the Bill and its enactment.

On Monday, during the nominations for Speaker, the point was made that because parliamentarians make legislation that affects the lives of our constituents, we must scrutinise it carefully so that the implications of our actions are fully recognised and evaluated. That was not done in 1994 by the free miners' then Member of Parliament. I have checked with the Library and at no stage during any debates on the Bill or during its Committee stage was any explicit mention made of the Forest of Dean and free mining.

The 1994 Act gave specific powers to the Coal Authority. It imposed licensing requirements on all coal mining operations, except those performed by or on behalf of the Crown. It also conferred responsibilities concerning health, safety and subsidence. I understand that it expressly excluded the Coal Authority from responsibility for subsidence within the hundred of St. Briavels, but not from imposing a licence on the same area. The Forestry Commission concluded from its legal advice that the gales did not require a Coal Authority licence, but, after intervention and pressure from the Department of Trade and Industry, it changed its stance and acquiesced to a non-conventional policy with the Coal Authority.

In the 1946 Act, licences were also deemed necessary, and gales in the Forest of Dean that were not under the licence of the National Coal Board had to obtain a licence, but one that was simplified and called a bare licence. During the build-up to the 1994 Act, it was agreed that the Forest of Dean free miners would be permitted to continue to operate on the simplified licence, even though that licence was often poorly and laxly administered.

It was clear that coal in the Forest of Dean was seen to be vested in the state under the aegis of the Coal Authority under the 1994 Act. However, the position of the free miners, their heirs and assigns is fully set out in the unrepealed Dean Forest Mines Enactments. Apart from an exclusive right of the grant of a gale licence, the heirs and assigns have all other rights. After the passage of the 1994 Act, free miners rightly felt that not only did they face dual regulation—because they were already regulated by the deputy gaveller—but they were subject to additional licensing, which had to be paid for, from the Coal Authority. That would effectively take away their ancient right.

There followed extensive negotiations with the free miners and the Forestry Commission on behalf of the deputy gaveller. The Coal Authority put into place a cheap, simple licensing arrangement—as they described it—which was finally agreed to in spring 1997; the timing will not pass anyone's notice, as it was just before the general election. Under the arrangement, free miners would have to pay a £50 licence. The licensing of other coal mining areas involves considerably higher amounts. It is important that the free miners were given a special licence in recognition of the fact that they were unique and different.

Some free miners agreed to the arrangement, but some did not. After the May 1997 election, they brought their case to me as their new Member of Parliament. They felt that the compromise of the reduced £50 licence—to which not all had agreed—was not good enough. Their principle had been lost, and so had their ancient right. My part in their campaign started from there. After extensive correspondence with the Department of Trade and Industry, I managed to secure time from the then Minister to meet me and a delegation. Although the Minister was sympathetic and wanted to assist, we could not make progress: it seemed that only primary legislation could alter the facts, and the Government could not at that time consider putting it on their agenda.

After considerable further representations, my right hon. Friend the Minister came to see for herself, for which I am most grateful. Does she now, like me, support the ancient customs of the free miners and does she believe that that the Coal Authority licensing threatens them? Does not she agree that the Dean Forest Mines Enactments are still statutes in force? Cannot we find a solution? Is it possible to open up fresh negotiations with the Coal Authority to reduce the April 1997 agreement of the £50 licence to zero, so that the miners can become free miners again? Is it possible to introduce a suitably worded ministerial direction under section 6 of the 1994 Act? I know that the Coal Authority has questioned whether that would be possible. Section 6(2) provides:

> It shall be the duty of the Authority to comply with such specific directions as may be given to it by the Secretary of State with respect to—
>
> (a) whether or not it exercises any of its powers and the manner in which any of its powers is to be exercised

The free miners suggested a suitable wording on page 12 of their submission to the Minister.

Section 1(5)(a) of the 1994 Act contains an exemption for the requirement of a licence for those operations that are performed by or on behalf of the Crown. Is not the Forest of Dean held by the Forestry Commission on behalf of the Crown, and are not the minerals therefore subject by statute solely to the rights of the Crown? I should be interested to hear, either today or later, my right hon. Friend's views on that point. Does she accept that free miners, by virtue of a gale, hold from the Crown a statutory licence to work the minerals appertaining to the gale and in return pay a share of their profits in the form of a royalty—known locally as the Queen's penny; that they are therefore partners with the Crown; and that, consequently, a second licence from the Coal Authority is contrary to the existing legislation and discriminatory and unfair to free miners?

At the meeting in July, my right hon. Friend the Minister made certain commitments. Further to that, has her Department researched the intentions relating to the free miners when the 1994 Act was prepared? Has the Department studied the excellent report that was prepared by the free miners, and will my right hon. Friend respond to the specific points that it makes?

[Mrs. Diana Organ]

This case, like the Forest of Dean, is unique. Testimony to that is the fact that there is no other Member of Parliament in the Chamber—no other Back-Bench Member, that is. It affects no other Member of Parliament. Free miners exist only in the Forest of Dean, so their case has no repercussions for other coalfields and cannot be used by other miners as a precedent. Currently, free mining is at an historical low point: world market prices are low and commercial output from the forest is exceedingly small. The issue directly affects only a handful of individuals, but it is nevertheless causing them distress. Some are facing pressure and enforcement action from the Coal Authority, or choosing not to work their gales to win the coal to which they have a right, because they refuse to pay the £50 licence.

However, there is a wider issue. Free mining is part of the entire Forest of Dean community. It is an integral aspect of and crucial to the forest and it is fundamental to the identity of a forester. It is a vital part of our tourist industry, providing a considerable attraction for visitors. It is not environmentally unfriendly—indeed, the present scale of operation is such that entire surface gear does not exceed more than a few hectares.

My right hon. Friend said in July that she would look at the issue afresh and draw a line under the past, so that we could move forward. I thank her for that; the free miners and I are aware of her commitment. I hope that she will be able to report on any progress made and answer the questions that I have raised today. The free miners, who have enjoyed their ancient rights for many centuries, have made it clear that they are not concerned with hurrying this issue. However, they want to get the principle right. They are prepared to fight on and campaign until they achieve some success, and I am with them.

1.41 pm

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I associate myself with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ). You and I go back a long way, Mrs. Michie, and it is a pleasure to appear before you. We both know parts of the country that are extremely beautiful and have rich and varied traditions and histories. However, I must put up my hands and say that, until I discussed the matter with my hon. Friend, I was unaware of the history of the Forest of Dean and the free miners. It was my pleasure to visit the forest and see great beauty, albeit beauty that differs greatly from the sort that you and I are used to, Mrs. Michie.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. This is without doubt one of the more fascinating matters that I have had to deal with as a Minister. It is also one of the most complex. Only a few hours after I became Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, she raised with me the issue of the free miners of the forest of Dean, so her dedication to their cause cannot in any way be questioned.

I have enormous sympathy for the free miners. Having met them, I know that they are men—I met no lady free miners—of huge integrity and dedication, who are conscious of their history. They mine not only coal, but ochre—I had not realised that ochre is mined in this country—and ironstone. Despite my sympathy for their cause and my great respect for them, there are differences between us, but they are differences in interpretation of law, not of commitment. The Government have no wish to see these ancient customs disappear and we accept that the Dean Forest Mines Enactments remain in force, but we must also accept that they are subject to provisions in later legislation.

When I visited the forest and met the delegation of free miners, I listened to their concerns and learned how strongly they feel about their licensing by the Coal Authority. My hon. Friend has referred to the submission that they have prepared as a consequence of my request that we draw a line under the past and try to assemble the arguments and take a fresh look at the issue. I received their submission at the beginning of September: it is impressive, comprehensive, and contains a clear expression of their contention and reasoning, and I am grateful for the work that went into it. My Department has studied it very carefully.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her final remark that the primary desire was not to speed matters along, because the complexity of some of the issues is such that the research will take some time to come to a conclusion. When I met the free miners, I promised that my officials would comb carefully through the Department's files relating to the preparation and passage of the Coal Industry Act 1994 to examine the consideration given at the time to the position of the free miners. My hon. Friend will be aware that I am not privileged to have access to the advice given to the previous Ministers; however, my officials assure me that consideration was given to the free miners.

Today's debate gives me an opportunity to explain some of the responses that have been given to the key points, not only in connection with the exercise that we are conducting, which is by no means complete, but with the general issues raised by my hon. Friend and by the free miners themselves. As soon as the research is completed, I will write to my hon. Friend and to the free miners; in the meantime, she knows that my door is always open and that I am willing to discuss these matters. However, I draw to my hon. Friend's attention the fact that some issues fall within the remit of the Coal Authority and therefore have to be discussed directly with that authority.

My hon. Friend asked me about my powers of direction over the Coal Authority. I have sought advice on that question and I am assured that I cannot direct the authority to do something that falls outside its statutory duties. The view of the authority and the Department has been that it is in accordance with the statutory framework for the Coal Authority to issue licences to free miners. That is a substantive point of difference between us and, although I have not been able to find a way forward, I pledge to continue to consider the issue.

The key issue relates to who owns the coal under the Forest of Dean. The Coal Authority owns the coal in the remainder of the country, but the free miners, as my hon. Friend said, assert that the Crown still owns the

coal under the forest. The free miners point out, rightly, that the Coal Authority is not the Crown, and cite provisions relevant to the forest in the Coal Act 1938 and the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act 1946. They have put forward new arguments relating to those provisions which we are seriously considering.

I must tell my hon. Friend, however, that the prevailing view in the past and now, which is also the view of the Coal Authority, is that ownership of the coal under the Forest of Dean lies with the authority. We consider that section 43 of the 1938 Act transferred the Forestry Commission's interest in the coal to the Coal Commission, but made that transfer subject to the Dean Forest Mines Enactments; the provision allowed free mining to continue, but ownership of the coal passed across. Similarly, section 63 of the 1946 Act exempted free mining operations from being swept up in the nationalisation of the coal industry, thus allowing important traditions to continue. However, it did not affect the ownership of the coal, which passed to the National Coal Board, later renamed the British Coal Corporation, and finally, in 1994, to the Coal Authority. There is no question that the Crown owns the surface of the forest and the other minerals contained beneath it, but ownership of the coal rests with the Coal Authority.

The power of the Coal Authority to issue licences to mine the coal stems from the Coal Industry Act 1994. My officials have examined papers relating to the preparation and passage of the legislation and they say that the papers clearly show that the unusual arrangements in the Forest of Dean were recognised at an early stage by those who developed the licensing policy. It is clear that they were aware of the system of gales and the simple, bare licences that British Coal issued to free miners under section 36 of the 1946 Act. The agreed policy for the forest was that it should follow that pattern and that the Coal Authority should issue simplified licences to free miners. That was made clear in an explanatory note issued by the Department in January 1994, and was explained in correspondence with Forestry Commission headquarters in May 1994. It is true that there was no direct contact with the free miners and, with hindsight, that is regrettable, but their position in relation to the new regime was anticipated and the legislation prepared accordingly.

On the issue of Crown exemption, in their meeting with me and in their submission, the free miners stated forcefully that they consider that they operate on behalf of the Crown and that, accordingly, they should enjoy exemption from licensing for the Crown under section 66 of the 1994 Act. The free miners' links with the Crown go back many centuries and legislation relating to them encapsulates traditions and procedures that have developed in that time. Examination of the 1994 Act reveals that the Crown exemptions were created with the interests of the royal estate and organisations such as Government Departments in mind. It appears that the intention was always that, under the legislation, the Forest of Dean would fall within the licensing remit. The view traditionally held by my Department is that the free miners do not mine on the Crown's behalf, as ownership of the coal rests with the Coal Authority. That is the substance of our debate. In their submission, the free miners made new and detailed arguments on that issue and I assure my hon. Friend that we are still examining them.

On the question of dual regulation, the free miners contend that they are regulated by two systems, which is unfair. My hon. Friend explained that the gale grants a statutory licence to work the minerals through section 1 of the Dean Forest Act 1861. I shall try to show that the free miners face a situation no different from that faced by any other coal mining operation in the United Kingdom.

Following the 1994 Act, any operator who wanted to mine coal had to secure both a licence from the Coal Authority under the 1994 Act and, in almost every case, a lease. The lease gives the operator the property interest in the coal and the licence grants permission to exploit it. The lease is usually obtained from the Coal Authority, but in the case of the Forest of Dean the necessary property interest originates in the gale granted by the deputy gaveller. Both a lease and a gale contain rental provisions, although, ironically, the rent from both returns to the Coal Authority. In turn, the authority has to pay the Forestry Commissioners the cost of managing their interest. That is where matters get complicated.

The lease—or gale, as the case may be—and the licence are different and it is vital to appreciate that difference. The two systems of gales and licences sit side by side—they do not replace one another. They fall under separate regimes, but both are necessary for coal mining in the forest in the same way as two documents are needed from the Coal Authority elsewhere in the country. Because of the distinct traditions of the Forest of Dean, the simple and cheap licences to which my hon. Friend referred have been devised for the benefit of the free miners. Therefore, far from free miners facing unfair hardship, they may have some advantage—I know that that will be difficult for my hon. Friend to accept. The free miners are spot on in saying that the 1994 Act does not replace other legislation; it sits side by side with it.

In 1997, the Forestry Commission and the Coal Authority reached an agreement on the terms of a simple, cheap licence for small-scale, traditional underground mining. That reconciled the characteristics of the free miners with the Coal Authority's statutory duties. It also made provisions on safety, subsidence and mining records, which are equally important in the Forest of Dean or anywhere else to safeguard the public. The arrangements provided an enhanced role for the deputy gaveller. The fee, at £50, is substantially less than the several thousands of pounds that a conventional mining operation pays and, at the time, it was regarded as a nominal sum. My hon. Friend asked for it to be cut and I am sure that she will raise the issue with the Coal Authority, although the authority might fear that other licensees would complain about such a reduction. I understand her anxieties, and I want to be of assistance, but I must say to my hon. Friend that compromise and understanding are required on both sides.

[Mrs. Helen Liddell]

I hope that I have answered most of the points raised by my hon. Friend, with whom I shall certainly maintain contact on these issues. I must also ask the miners to recognise the changes that have taken place over the years. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on an important issue. I hope that she will take my good wishes to the free miners of the Forest of Dean.

Mrs. Organ: I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for her very clear answers, which provide some avenues for us to pursue, especially those relating to the Crown. In some areas, we now know that there are new arguments for us to marshal. We shall have to look at her answers and be aware that, in some cases, we are going to win and in others, we are not—

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Order. Is this an intervention? If so, it should be brief.

Mrs. Organ: May I just say many thanks to the Minister? I shall pass on her good wishes to the free miners in the Forest of Dean.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): We have come to the end of a very interesting debate, and I thank both participants.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at three minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 26 October 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Double Jeopardy Rule

[*Relevant documents: Third report from the Home Affairs Committee Session 1999-2000 HC190.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): This is the first time that we have had a debate in this Chamber on a report from the Select Committee on Home Affairs, and I confess that this is the first time that I have taken part in a debate in the different atmosphere created by the shape of this Chamber. I very much welcome it. The third report of the Home Affairs Committee on "The Double Jeopardy Rule" is unusual in several ways. It is a response to a consultation paper from the Law Commission. We did not take evidence directly from the Government, although we heard some helpful evidence from the Director of Public Prosecutions. We have not sought a Government response because that will have to await the Law Commission's final recommendations.

The Law Commission's thinking has moved on a little since its consultation paper in October 1999, and perhaps the Minister of State, Home Office my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), will tell us what the Home Office thinks about that.

The proposal to relax the double jeopardy rule in specific circumstances goes back to the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. The House will recall that, following a bungled police inquiry, a private prosecution of those who were alleged to have murdered Stephen Lawrence failed. Under the double jeopardy rule, anyone acquitted cannot be tried again for the same offence. The Macpherson report recommended that

> consideration should be given to the Court of Appeal being given power to permit prosecution after acquittal where fresh and viable evidence is presented.

The Home Secretary then referred the matter to the Law Commission, which published a closely argued consultation paper in October 1999. It proposed that the High Court should be able to quash a conviction and order a retrial on the grounds of new evidence, subject to several conditions: first, if the defendant were convicted of the offence now alleged, the sentence would probably be of a specified minimum severity; secondly, if the new evidence makes the prosecution's case substantially stronger than at the first trial; thirdly, if there is a very high probabililty of the defendant being convicted at retrial; fourthly, if the defendant has not previously been acquitted of the offence at a trial held by virtue of this exception to the double jeopardy rule; fifthly, if the new evidence could not, with due diligence, have been adduced at the first trial; and finally, if the court is satisfied that, in all the circumstances of the case, it is in the interests of justice to quash the acquittal.

The Committee asked itself the following questions. Does the public interest in convicting the guilty outweigh the longstanding principle of double jeopardy? Does the availability of new evidence arising largely from scientific advance mean that an old and fundamental principle should be re-examined? If changes are to be made, would the proposed safeguards be sufficient to ensure that the new procedure would be used only in exceptional cases? Would a change of rule ensure that fair second trials could be held, and that people would be convicted?

The Committee took evidence in January and February this year and received 18 memorandums from civil liberty groups, lawyers and the police. We also heard oral evidence from the Director of Public Prosecutions and the chief constable of Kent on behalf of the Association of Chief Police Officers, barristers and solicitors. We had a useful and informal meeting with the Law Commission. The exercise was carried out in collaboration with the Law Commission, and we are grateful for its co-operation.

Our report was published in May this year. It was a finely balanced inquiry. It had to be for us to conclude, as we did, that a double jeopardy rule that dated back to Roman times and had been in the common law since the 19th century should be altered. It was our view that the public would not understand the notion that a suspect should be able to avoid trial on some of the most serious criminal offences even if compelling new evidence became available after a first trial and acquittal, and perhaps even after a subsequent confession.

Advances in DNA technology enable the analysis of a blood sample to demonstrate with near certainty that an acquitted person has been at the scene of the crime, even if that has been denied and could not be proved at trial. In addition, the Director of Public Prosecutions told us about advances in fingerprinting, photographic recognition, corneal and face mapping and even, unbelievably, reliable ear prints. There have also been cases in which the prime suspect was not prosecuted because of lack of evidence but was convicted years later after scientific information made the original evidence more compelling. We were referred to two particular cases—the case of the beauty in the bath and the murder of Dr. Joan Francisco. If the criminals in question had been tried and acquitted earlier, they would have remained free and guilty. We were told of at least seven press reports published in the past two years about people who, having once been acquitted of a serious offence, subsequently confessed their guilt under the safety of the current double jeopardy rule.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I commend my hon. Friend and his Committee on their report, which I read with great interest. He mentioned a question that is at the heart of our discussion. Just how useful would the change be in addressing the perceived wrong? As my hon. Friend said, the Committee took evidence from the Director of Public Prosecutions. When the initial part of that evidence was heard, my hon. Friend pressed the DPP to identify from his own records or information the number of cases to which the change would be applied. He could not produce any numbers—I understand why that might have happened—and promised to write back to the

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

Committee with information. However, there is no sign in the report that he did so. Did he write back, and, if so, what information did he provide?

Mr. Corbett: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. As far as I can remember, the DPP did not write back, although we received information via another route. From memory, I think that the chief constable of Kent, speaking on behalf of ACPO, referred to about three dozen cases in respect of which the proposed amendment of the double jeopardy rule would provide confidence that convictions could be obtained, especially in the light of DNA advances.

We were told of at least seven press reports in the past two years about people who had been acquitted but had subsequently confessed their guilt. That is precisely what offends public interest and collides with what the DPP, Mr. David Calvert-Smith, told us was an underlying principle of our legal system. He said:

> The whole point of a criminal justice system is to bring criminals to justice.

Our views were set against the background of the common law rule that, once acquitted, a person cannot be tried again for the same offence. It is, however, worth recalling that a convicted person has the right to present fresh evidence to the Court of Appeal or to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, in order to seek to overturn the conviction. Where convictions are found to be unsafe, it is right that they should be overturned. On the other side of the coin, however, why should someone who is tried on inadequate evidence and then acquitted be protected from a second trial when compelling new evidence points to guilt? Victim Support told us:

> The law must be concerned to prevent Miscarriages of justice to the defendant and also to the victim.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): Is not the right way to handle such cases not to proceed to court in the first place until the Director of Public Prosecutions is relatively content that he has a strong case?

Mr. Corbett: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. If only life were that simple. However, it is not. My hon. Friend will know as well as I do that the DPP and his staff take as much care as possible when examining files containing all the evidence presented to them by the police in order to make a judgment on the likelihood of obtaining a prosecution. Those judgments are the best that can be made.

The advance in DNA technology makes it possible later on, as the years roll by, to discover evidence that was hidden at the original trial and acquittal.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. From a technical point of view, it would be helpful if the hon. Gentleman would direct his remarks to the Chair, because when he turns away from the microphone the technicians must make alternative arrangements. We want to ensure that all his words are recorded.

Mr. Corbett: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

There has, understandably, been opposition to our views from the Criminal Bar Association, the Law Society and Liberty, among others, as well as a critical early-day motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). I shall deal directly with some of these objections.

Mr. Andrew Trollope, who chaired a Criminal Bar Association working party on the subject, told us:

> There is a burden on the State, which has hugely more resources than any individual, when they start the investigation, to conduct it with due diligence and not to put a person on trial until such time as they have gathered in all the evidence that they competently and properly can.

That was the point made by my hon. Friend. I accept that, but, as I said a few moments ago, it fails to acknowledge that, even with due diligence, scientific advances—such as those made with DNA—can reveal evidence that was earlier hidden.

Liberty told us that the prospect of a further trial after an acquittal

> would cause needless anxiety and insecurity to thousands of acquitted defendants.

David Calvert-Smith, the Director of Public Prosecutions, had a response to that when he said:

> No judge would ever allow the prosecution a second bite at the cherry to make up for police incompetence at the first trial; it would be inconceivable.

In any event, the fairness of a possible second trial would have to be argued before a court, and a judge could decide in certain circumstances that that second trial could not be justified.

Dr. Ladyman: Has my hon. Friend not touched on an important point? If we step on to that slippery slope, will that not be exactly the sort of argument that comes back to us in a few years' time, when someone says, "We should have another trial, if the police were incompetent in the first place"? We might then gradually relax the double jeopardy rule until we automatically had another trial whenever we failed to obtain a conviction.

Mr. Corbett: My hon. Friend is right to raise those concerns, but he must understand, as we reflect on the report, that it is not simply a matter of the police, a few months or years down the road, deciding that they want to have another go at a case. They would have to persuade the Court of Appeal that the acquittal should be set aside, and that it would be in the public interest to bring a second prosecution. If my hon. Friend will bear with me, I shall come to the matter of so-called due diligence in just a moment.

The Law Society argued that there would be a

> real risk of the jury at the retrial assuming that the new evidence must be reliable and that the defendant must be guilty.

Again, Mr. David Calvert-Smith was able to help. This comment, made by the director on the basis of his experience before the courts over many years, was compelling and allayed some of my worries. He said:

> There have been a number of very dramatic examples in recent years where trials, or retrials, ordered by the Court of Appeal have taken place in circumstances in which, had the jury read the judgement of the Court of Appeal, they would have no doubt whatever, at the start of the trial, that the defendant was guilty. But the trial has been fair because jurors do, in fact, now obey the directions of judges and focus on the evidence.

Although I am not a lawyer, and do not claim to understand such matters in detail, I was interested to hear him expand on that point later. He said that during all his experience at the criminal bar, whatever background knowledge about a trial jurors take into the jury box with them, soon after the trial begins they focus on the arguments that are put to them as it unfolds.

In his early-day motion, my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet called the recommendations "deeply flawed" and argued that they may

> allow some apparent injustices to be addressed in the short term but would lead to far more and far greater injustices in the long term.

It is important that all views are considered during the debate, but I feel that my colleagues may have overlooked the need to prevent miscarriages of justice for victims or their families.

The Law Commission originally suggested that the exception to the double jeopardy rule should apply only to offences likely to attract sentences of at least three years. The Committee took the view that it should apply only to offences for which a life sentence was available, such as robbery, aggravated burglary, causing grievous bodily harm, supply of class A drugs, manslaughter, rape and arson.

The chairman of the Law Commission recently wrote to the Committee to say that it has revised its views in the light of the consultation exercise and considers that the exception to the double jeopardy rule should apply only to charges of murder and reckless killing, under its separate proposals on involuntary manslaughter. That may go some way to addressing my hon. Friend's concerns. The commission has not reached a firm view on the matter, and will be interested to hear hon. Members' reactions in the course of the debate.

Returning to my hon. Friend's point, the Law Commission has also modified its views on whether the quality of the original police investigation should influence the decision as to whether a second trial could be held. The original suggestion was that new evidence could not be used to justify a second trial if a reasonably competent police investigation should have turned it up in the first place. The underlying idea was that it would be unfair to try someone again on evidence that, but for police incompetence, would have been available at the earlier trial. It could be argued that giving the police a second bite of the cherry in that way would encourage them to be less diligent on the first occasion.

The Committee was persuaded by the evidence from the chief constable of Kent, on behalf of ACPO, that the procedures for police investigations are now much more rigorous than they used to be, and that the possibility of a second trial would not make the original investigation less assiduous. We therefore thought that the so-called due diligence test was not an appropriate requirement for a second trial. Paragraph 36 of our report states:

> If a second trial is ruled out because police incompetence had failed in the first, the only winner is the guilty. The victim or the victim's family are left doubly denied justice.

The Law Commission now suggests that the diligence of the police should be taken into account but should not be an absolute requirement.

It is for those and other reasons, which will be argued by my colleagues, that the Committee came to the conclusion that there should be these narrow and specific exceptions to the general double jeopardy rule. Given the proposed safeguards, we felt that that would strike a better balance between the rights of the defendant, the rights of victims and their families and the overall interests of justice. We do not expect—and do not believe that judges would allow—such a change to be used in many cases. However, if it were used, it would bring justice to victims and their families, which is now denied.

Few, if any, proposals about criminal justice pass through the House without lively debate, and I am sure that these will be no exception. I look forward to hearing those views and the Government's initial response to them.

2.49 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): Like all hon. Members present, I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) and his colleagues on the Home Affairs Select Committee for the diligent manner in which they reviewed this issue and their positive contribution to the debate. It is a welcome fact that the relatively novel procedure—in parliamentary terms—of debating in Westminster Hall enables us to visit this topic in the context of the Home Affairs Committee's report. Of course, we are grateful to the Law Commission for taking on the important task of reviewing the double jeopardy rule, and for the detailed and careful way in which it has done so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erdington referred to Sir William Macpherson's report on the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. Sir William posed the question whether the law should provide absolute—I stress, absolute—protection for someone who has been acquitted of an offence, even if fresh and viable evidence that the acquittal was an injustice emerges after the trial. We are addressing that important question today, and I want to say a few words at the outset about our response to the inquiry report.

A lot of good work has been taken forward in the 20 months since the report was published. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has established, and chairs, a steering group that is tasked to audit and oversee implementation of his action plan, which will advance the recommendations in Sir William Macpherson's report. The first annual progress report indicated that more than half the 70 recommendations had already been implemented, and work is well under way on the others. We recognise the importance of maintaining that momentum, which includes consideration of the double jeopardy rule.

The Stephen Lawrence inquiry report recommended that consideration be given to empowering the court of appeal to permit prosecution after acquittal where fresh and viable evidence is presented. The Government accepted that recommendation, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary immediately referred the proposals to the Law Commission, so that it might review them and consideration might therefore take place. It is an important and significant area of the law, and we have made it clear that the Government will take no decisions on the merits of relaxing the law on double jeopardy until the Law Commission has made its final report, which is expected early next year. However, I

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welcome the opportunity to debate the issue at this stage. In reaching a decision on whether a change in the law is desirable, we believe it important that we get the law right.

I do not doubt that comments made in this Chamber, the Home Affairs Committee's response to the recommendation and the interim response to the Law Commission review will help to generate debate among the wider public. With the greatest of respect to m' learned friends, it is important that this debate is not confined simply to lawyers. We have our own traditions, interests and understandable concerns about legal developments in an area in which we practise. However, it is important that lay people should not feel in any way inhibited about making a contribution—indeed, a robust and considered contribution—to the debate. [*Interruption.*] I see that some are already beginning to shake their heads; I know not whether in dissent or despair.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): I shall rise to that bait: despair is the answer. Will my right hon. Friend accept that many lawyers have a legitimate interest in the debate because we are concerned with the civil liberties of the subject, not because we are lawyers but because we are involved, day by day, in precisely that matter?

Mr. Boateng: Of course I accept that, but lay members also have concerns about civil liberties—those of victims and defendants alike. I argue only that it is important that we hear, and that lay people feel equally empowered to contribute to the debate. Those of us who are lawyers should not think that we have a monopoly of wisdom on this subject, or a monopoly of concern about civil liberties.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I accept that lawyers do not have a monopoly of wisdom in this, or perhaps any other, case, and with due modesty I am sure that all the lawyers here would agree. Since a point has been made about civil liberties, would my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that, when it comes to murder, the very life of a person is taken away—leaving aside the feelings of the immediate family after such a disaster? Surely the whole purpose of justice is that those who take life should face justice and be duly punished if found guilty.

Mr. Boateng: That is a view that will resonate with many—lawyers and non-lawyers—and is a legitimate point to make in a debate such as this. We shall take into account the views set out in the Select Committee report and those expressed by hon. Members in the debate.

I shall not take up much time in setting out the detailed background of our proposals. My hon. Friend the Member for Erdington has already ably covered that territory, but it is important to state that we have not reached any conclusions on the issue. I am primarily here to listen—a disappointment to some and a relief to many—rather than to express a view at this stage on the Government's behalf.

To deal briefly with the issue of principle that is at the heart of the Lawrence inquiry's proposals, the double jeopardy rule is a long-standing part of our criminal law. It dates back to the 12th century and provides that someone cannot be retried for the same offence or a different offence that is based on the same, or substantially the same, facts if he or she has previously been acquitted, or indeed convicted, of that offence. I know that there are many who have genuine concerns about the issue, on both sides of the debate. Some, I know, believe that removing that absolute protection would erode the status of an acquittal, so that trials ending in acquittal would be provisional, pending further inquiry and the discovery of new evidence. That point was ably made in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Erdington.

The principle of finality for the defendant is clearly important, but there is, also, a competing principle—it was referred to by other hon. Members—which is that criminals should be brought to justice. That principle should be given careful consideration to establish whether an imbalance exists and, if so, how best it might be dealt with.

In recent years, there has rightly been concern about serious miscarriages of justice involving the wrongful conviction of defendants. Parliament has responded by reforming the procedures for reviewing appeals, with the creation of an independent Criminal Cases Review Commission. That is something that many in this Room, myself among them, long campaigned for. The commission may review cases, including new evidence that might have emerged since the trial and that might cast doubt on the safety of the conviction. Where the commission considers that there is a real possibility that the conviction might not be upheld, it has the power to refer the case to the court of criminal appeal. That court may, after reviewing the evidence, quash the conviction on the grounds that it is unsafe.

We have an extraordinary procedure for the review of criminal convictions outside the normal time limits, with the determination subject to the supervision of the appellate courts. In contrast, if a victim believes that there has been a wrongful acquittal, there is no mechanism for correcting that miscarriage. The prosecution has no right to reinstate proceedings apart from the narrow circumstances where it can be established that the conviction has been tainted as a result of jury or witness nobbling. The prosecution also has no right of appeal against judicial decisions that lead to termination of proceedings. The Government have asked the Law Commission to look at both those issues to see whether the law strikes the right balance.

It is extremely difficult for any of us who have not been there to understand the anguish that victims and their families feel when there is no satisfactory resolution to a case. We can but admire their courage and determination to seek justice. I do not know whether any other hon. Members were present, but I can well remember a meeting of victims we held in this Room. The anger, sadness and frustration of those people, many of whom had had to live through the loss of a loved one, were heart rending.

The distress can be even greater if, following an acquittal, new evidence comes to light to prove that the accused was guilty of the crime. There have been instances of criminals admitting in their memoirs to crimes for which they were acquitted and thereby

profiting. Earlier this summer, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary met the family of Julie Hogg, who was brutally murdered in 1989, to discuss this issue.

Julie's killer, Billy Dunlop, was formally acquitted of her murder in 1991 after two juries had failed to reach verdicts, but while serving a prison sentence for an unconnected assault he confessed that he had lied on oath during the earlier court proceedings and that he had murdered Julie. He pleaded guilty to perjury in April of this year but could not be retried for Julie's murder because of the double jeopardy rule. For her family, the belief that he quite literally "got away with murder" made a grievous blow even harder to bear.

That is clearly the type of case we shall want to consider in weighing the importance of the double jeopardy principle in protecting the rights of the defendant against repeated prosecutions, against the need to ensure that guilty people do not escape justice.

Dr. Ladyman: Given the case that my right hon. Friend has just outlined where someone was prosecuted for perjury, would a way of dealing with this without tampering with the double jeopardy law be to make the same sentence available for a trial for perjury where perjury was used to avoid a guilty conviction at the original trial?

Mr. Boateng: It is one way. But for the families, someone being found guilty of perjury does not have the same ring as being found guilty of murder. One should never underestimate—I am sure that as a practitioner in the courts my hon. Friend does not do so—the importance of the symbolism of the charge and a guilty verdict. We do not engage in this simply for the sake of form; we do so because words and actions carry their own power. Being guilty of murder is different from being guilty of perjury.

Mr. Winnick: If it so happened that some of those acquitted for the murder of Stephen Lawrence were charged and found guilty of perjury, and only perjury, what would Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence think about that?

Mr. Boateng: I am not sure that I would want to speculate on that. I repeat my point that for the families of victims the conviction for the charge in many instances is as important as the length of any sentence served. We are determined to ensure that greater account is taken of the interests of victims while maintaining the rights of defendants in the criminal justice system.

We are concerned not only with victims, important though they are, but with the right of the wider community to see that justice is done. With the scientific advances in DNA testing, there is increasing potential for fresh and viable evidence to emerge, which will result in retrials only if there is an exemption to the double jeopardy rule.

In response to the Home Secretary's request, the Law Commission published a detailed consultation paper last year on its proposals for changes to the double jeopardy rule. Broadly speaking, it proposed that the rule should be retained except in cases in which compelling new evidence becomes available. The Select Committee came to a similar conclusion—that there is a strong case for the relaxation of the double jeopardy rule if new evidence makes the previous acquittal unsafe. We shall take into account the Select Committee's support for reform in reaching our conclusions on the issue. I look forward to hearing the views of others during the debate.

When referring to the law on double jeopardy, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State asked the Law Commission to consider, as part of the review, our international obligations, to ensure that any proposals for change were compatible with those obligations. The Law Commission's consultation paper helpfully set out the background to the issue, including how other criminal jurisdictions approached that difficult matter. Apart from the principle involved, the commission recognised that any changes would need to be subject to safeguards. Therefore it sought views on a number of practical issues, including what offences would be subject to the relaxed rule, whether there should be a due diligence test requiring that the new evidence could not have been adduced at the first trial had the police and prosecution shown due diligence and whether the exception to the rule should have a retrospective effect.

I am aware of anxieties that relaxation of the double jeopardy rule might result in less diligent police investigations; I note that the Select Committee, importantly, concluded that it did not expect that such changes to the law would have an adverse impact on the quality of further police investigation.

Mr. Browne: Before my right hon. Friend moves too far from the issue of our international obligations, which have been incorporated into our country's law, I ask him to consider a small point that troubles me about the proposal, as I am not entirely satisfied that the Law Commission has resolved it. It is not whether we have to retain the double jeopardy rule and allow exceptions in terms of the protocol, but whether our own courts would be in breach of article 6 of the European convention on human rights, which requires trials to be concluded within a reasonable time. That reasonable time cannot be concluded until determination, and determination must mean something; if the double jeopardy rule is not in existence potentially for any case of the nature to which my right hon. Friend refers, those cases could never be considered to be determined on one view.

Without making the intervention into a speech, I want to say that England and Wales have limited experience of the convention being in force. Scotland has longer experience and some decisions in Scotland refer to European jurisprudence on the issue. Has my right hon. Friend anything to say about that?

Mr. Boateng: We will reflect on that matter as part of our consideration of the points made by hon. Members in the debate. I would expect the Law Commission to do likewise in finalising its views on the matter.

We must ensure that police investigations are conducted efficiently and the Government will take that into account before reaching a final decision on whether there is a need to change the law.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I understand that the Government have

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refused to ratify protocol 7 to the European convention on human rights, which specifically deals with that issue. Will the Minister explain the Government's refusal? The protocol allows a broad interpretation, so even if the Government signed it, they could still change the double jeopardy rule.

Mr. Boateng: Our action regarding protocol 7 does not relate directly to our review of the law of double jeopardy. The hon. Gentleman would be mistaken to confuse the two. We made a commitment to ratifying protocol 7 when our concern about inconsistencies in family law was addressed. I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but he should not link our position on protocol 7 to our commissioning of a review of the law of double jeopardy. As I said, it is important not to confuse the two issues.

It is right to have a full and informed discussion of all the issues thrown up by the law of double jeopardy and of the balance that we need to strike between the rights of offenders and the rights of the victims of crime. It is right to respond not by a knee-jerk reaction to either side of the argument, but in a careful and considered way. I hope that all hon. Members will recognise that that is what underpins the Government's approach. We are enormously indebted to the Select Committee for its careful consideration of the problems and the obvious balance that it demonstrated in arriving at its conclusions.

3.12 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I begin by declaring not so much an interest in the parliamentary sense, as a background, as I practised at the Bar for several years and took some criminal cases, albeit not so many and not at so senior a level as the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews), who will doubtless speak later. During my legal career before I entered the House, I was heavily involved in the Bar Council and, during my parliamentary career, I spent some time in the inner cabinet, the general management committee of the Bar Council.

Unusually for a Member of Parliament, both my parents were research scientists. Neither was involved in forensic science. However, as I read the report produced by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) and the Select Committee on Home Affairs, I observed that, if the double jeopardy rule were changed, courts could have the opportunity to consider fresh scientific evidence that was unavailable at the time of the original trial. I find myself pulled to some extent in two different directions. As a member of the Bar, I am influenced by the length of time during which the double jeopardy rule has been sacrosanct in English law; but in view of the importance of forensic scientific evidence, I am more inclined to think that for the protection of victims and their families, the rule needs to be examined again.

I also served on the Home Affairs Committee before I was appointed to my current Front-Bench position. I thoroughly enjoyed my time on that Committee. Subsequently, when the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) became a Minister, I was delighted that the hon. Member for Erdington was appointed as the new Chairman of the Committee. The way in which he introduced today's debate typifies the reasons why members of all parties who served on the Committee felt that he would be a good Chairman. When I practised at the Bar in the midlands, my main chambers were in Birmingham, and I remember the hon. Gentleman's good reputation as a constituency Member of Parliament. I also know of his long-standing interest in issues such as the double jeopardy rule. Without wishing to sound sycophantic, I pay tribute to him for the careful way in which he introduced the debate. It shows that the House of Commons may be at its best when discussing sensitive issues on which the judgments are finely balanced.

Members of all the main parties and perhaps of all the parties in the House take different views on the issue, for perfectly honourable reasons. It is with some hesitation, therefore, that I advance what is not only my view but that of the official Opposition. I anticipate that the hon. and learned Member for Medway will come down on a different side of the argument. I also hesitate because I know that the Criminal Bar Association opposes my view, and that of the Select Committee, that a modest change should be made in the double jeopardy rule. I have read with great care the submissions made to the Committee by those who gave evidence from the CBA and the Law Society. One is always hesitant about issues on which the arguments are finely balanced.

The official Opposition decided some time ago that we agreed with the Law Commission that the issue needed to be reconsidered and that change might be needed. We did so for many of the reasons given in the Select Committee's report. However, I stress that the official Opposition had stated their position before the Committee produced its report. I do not want people to suggest that we are simply responding to the report. I gave several radio interviews on the subject, along with Government Members who take a different view from the Committee, before it reported.

Like the Government, the Opposition will want to consider carefully the views of the Law Commission in its final report. We very much welcome what the Home Affairs Committee has said on this difficult issue. The evidence sessions were obviously undertaken with great care. Many difficult issues were canvassed and discussed at length by members of the Committee, who asked detailed and probing questions of the witnesses who appeared before them.

I agree with the Minister that both Government and Opposition must consider the matter afresh when the Law Commission produces its final report, because it may have new things to say. It will doubtless consider the Select Committee's report. Like the Minister and the hon. Member for Erdington, I recognise the strongly held views such as those held by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman), which he expressed in his early-day motion. He is entitled to his view; the arguments are closely balanced.

The witnesses from the CBA and the Law Society who appeared before the Select Committee raised issues such as the way in which juries might be influenced and the possible need to consider additional safeguards. The Law Commission might make further recommendations, possibly including the extra safeguard of consulting the Law Officers. When I read

that passage in the evidence, I was reminded of the provisions introduced when we were in government—which have been supported and extended by the current Government—about involving the Law Officers in appeals against over-lenient sentences. That matter may need to be reconsidered after the commission produces its final report.

On balance, most members of the public are concerned that our criminal justice system should convict and properly punish those who are guilty. It is a truism, in parliamentary debate and in law, that it is better for guilty people to be acquitted, sometimes in the teeth of the evidence, than for innocent people to be convicted. Despite that truism, it is undoubtedly in the public interest for those who are guilty to be convicted of the crimes of which they are guilty. The public are hugely concerned by cases in which it is clear from the appearance of new evidence that could not have been available at the time of the original trial that someone who was guilty got away with it. In that regard, I would have mentioned the poignant Hogg and Dunlop case, had the Minister not rightly done so. There is a huge difference between being convicted of murder at the original trial and being convicted of perjury following a subsequent confession. That case brings into sharp focus the reasons why we are now forming judgments about those finely balanced questions and deciding whether there should be a change in the law.

The fact that there is now so much more use of forensic scientific evidence in our courts and that there are so many opportunities for new evidence to be brought to light as a result of scientific advances, strengthens the case for reform. When the Select Committee was questioning witnesses, it looked particularly at matters to do with scientific developments of DNA testing and there was a great deal of arcane and technical discussion about the way in which eye and ear prints might in future be used in evidence. That is still a developing area.

In parenthesis, I mention a matter that is not vital to the debate but I feel is important. On reading the Select Committee report I was reminded of how often the media misuse the word "forensic". Most commentators suppose that "forensic" has something to do with science because they come across it only in regard to the courts but, as we all know, the correct term is "forensic scientific evidence". The term "forensic evidence" alone, as journalists so often use it, does not convey anything because it means simply something that relates to the court. If only one thing comes out of our debate, it may be the understanding that we are talking about forensic scientific evidence.

Having made that perhaps pedantic point, I return to the main issue. We shall continue to debate the issues, probably over months and perhaps years. I do not know whether other hon. Members will have a clearer idea than I of when the Law Commission will finally report, but whenever it does the House will have to return to the matter. I hope that in future such debates, on a sensitive and important topic, will take place in the main Chamber. The hon. Member for Erdington said that it was the first time that he had spoken in Westminster Hall and that he was enjoying the experience. I am not myself a supporter of the experiment of the new parallel Chamber, as I have made clear privately and publicly. Time will tell whether it survives. Whatever the case, hon. Members on all sides will have to search their conscience, look at the evidence on both sides of those finely balanced arguments and reach a conclusion. As I said earlier, the House of Commons as a whole is often at its best when thoughtfully debating moral, philosophical and legal questions.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I agree that we should consider both general principles and detailed evidence. Could the hon. Gentleman tell me why his party leader and his party took a committed position on the issue, before the Law Commission had finished its consultation and before the Home Affairs Committee had published its report? That absolutely contradicts the spirit of what the hon. Gentleman is saying and the logic of having a considered rather than a knee-jerk response to a difficult issue.

Mr. Hawkins: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman confirms my point that we were not responding simply to the Select Committee or to the Law Commission. I suspect that, if we had made our position clear only after the publication of those reports, we would have been accused of jumping on a bandwagon. The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways, although that is an approach with which we are familiar from his party.

The hon. Gentleman did, however, make an important point. He asked whether we had thought the matter through. Having heard my remarks, I hope that he will accept that my colleagues and I had thought carefully about the issues at the time the Law Commission and the Select Committee were working on them. Like me, he knows that double jeopardy and related matters have been considered for some years by lawyers and especially by legal academics. It was the Macpherson inquiry report on the tragic murder of Stephen Lawrence that brought the matter into sharper focus and into general public debate. My colleagues and I had been personally and professionally interested in these issues for a number of years. It is, therefore, a misconception to suggest that we were wrong to set out a position once the matter entered into the public domain after the publication of the Macpherson report. As I said, I think that the hon. Gentleman would have taken a different tack if we had waited until the report's publication before announcing our position, although that is perhaps a matter for merely partisan debate.

Mr. Hughes: I follow that argument, but I still find it difficult to understand why a party takes a position, to which it will presumably hold—

Mr. Corbett: Not necessarily.

Mr. Hughes: The presumption is that it will hold to its view. I find it difficult to understand why a party took its position on an issue such as this at a time when a considered recommendation was about to be made. Indeed, it was to be made in the following year and, in all likelihood, before a general election. Of course, it may finally differ from the position of the hon. Gentleman's party. Are his party and party leader open to changing their position in the light of the Law Commission's final view?

Mr. Hawkins: Any political party always has to consider the evidence before it. As the Minister said, the

[Mr. Hawkins]

Government party will wait for the Law Commission recommendations before announcing its concluded view. Personally, however, I see no prospect of a change in our position, as we feel that we have considered all the difficult and sensitive issues at stake. That does not mean to say that we will not respond to any new points that are made by the Law Commission in its final report. The hon. Gentleman's party is known not merely nationally but internationally for arguing one position in one constituency and another position, 360 deg or 180 deg the other way round, in a neighbouring one whenever it suits it to do so. It is, therefore, a bit rich for the hon. Gentleman to talk about consistency.

As I said, despite my great interest in the issue under discussion, I must apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the Minister and to other hon. Members. I may have to leave a little before the debate ends because of another commitment. I would not usually leave a debate of such importance, but I undertake to read all the speeches with great care. I can only apologise for the fact that I may have to leave early, for reasons of which you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the Minister are aware.

It behoves us all to consider the difficult cases that are bound to arise during the next few months and years from the review of double jeopardy, and to examine carefully the Law Commission's final report. We must take a decision, as we are elected by our constituents exactly to take decisions such as this. We will not all agree and there will be differences within the parties. My view and that of the Opposition is that there is now a strong set of reasons for minor changes, with a number of safeguards and affecting a tiny number of cases. That is why the Select Committee was right in its conclusion. I once again commend it for its thorough piece of work.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. A large number of hon. Members want to speak in the debate. If we are to fit them all in and have time for the Minister's reply, I advise them to be as brief as they can, given the importance of the subject.

3.29 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I, too, welcome the debate, especially in the context of having the opportunity to debate Select Committee reports at this stage. I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee and his colleagues for taking a timely issue, dealing with it thoroughly and calling eminent and appropriate people to give evidence. I also thank them for their report. I include in that context my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), who has just joined us in the Chamber.

In general terms, I shall take the same line as the Minister, in that we have taken the view that we should wait for the Law Commission to complete its work before reaching our final conclusion. It would prejudice our party's consideration and our final conclusion if I were suddenly to announce, here and now, that I was critical of the leader of the Conservative party at the time of that announcement, for just that reason. That is why I made the point a minute ago. The Government were right to say that they have set the process in train, and that they will ask the relevant people—including the Select Committee on Home Affairs—to give them advice, which they will weigh up.

The Law Commission itself has asked for others to give advice. The Home Affairs Committee—as the Chairman clearly pointed out—rightly produced a report with a different expected sequence of events, given the context. Therefore, the right process is for us to hold this debate, and for the Law Commission to finish its work—I understand, as does the Minister, that it will do so early in the new year—after which hon. Members will formally come to a view. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, like all members of the Committee, is free to form a view as a Committee member, and he endorsed the view of the Select Committee. One can entirely understand where the Select Committee's views came from.

I shall heed your request for brevity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I just want to make a few points that relate to the debate. First, I start from the principle that there needs to be an overwhelming reason for change. The case must be made on extremely good grounds, and we must work on the basis that any change would be made only as necessary and sufficient to accommodate the concerns that exist. In other words, it would probably involve a small exception to a general rule, instead of ranging more widely. That is the tenor of the Select Committee report.

Secondly, I declare that I would need to be persuaded. I do not have a closed mind on the issue. There are arguments on both sides. I do not come to the debate with a fixed position on the subject. I am not being secretive with colleagues or other hon. Members and saying that, whatever happens, I know what I am going to say at the end of the debate. I do not come to it with that view, and I hope that that is an honest position to adopt.

Thirdly, although it is important that we respond to the Macpherson report's request that this issue be examined—the only official request that has been made, as I understand it—that should not make the case for change. As a south-east London Member of Parliament who sat in on the Macpherson inquiry on occasions, and who has met Doreen and Neville Lawrence and knows their lawyer, I understand exactly their motivation. However, one needs more than one bad case, one unsatisfactory resolution, to shift the burden. That case, therefore, raises an issue for me but does not answer it.

The Select Committee report mentions, and the Law Commission also alludes to the fact, that other matters under consideration are linked to this issue. I think that it is wrong to separate them. The Director of Public Prosecutions expressed concern in the last answer of his oral evidence to the Select Committee that if the Government, the Law Commission and the Select Committee linked the consideration of this issue with the consideration of prosecution appeals against judges' decisions, it might unnecessarily delay the whole process. In my view, those are linked issues, and there should be a conclusion that links them together. They should be considered together, because they are both procedural matters concerning the way in which the

criminal justice system deals with what are perceived to be wrong decisions along the route. It would be wrong to legislate on one without the other.

I know that Sir Robin Auld has been asked by the Government to review the criminal justice system, and I understand that he is on target to complete his work by the end of the year, after which a significant report will be published. In the interests of good law and good consideration of changes in legal and criminal procedure, all such matters should be considered in the round. That is partly why many of us, like the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews), felt strongly—regardless of any other objections—that there should be no change in the right to choose jury trial. The whole area was shortly to be examined, and it appeared to us that it would be wrong to deal with one issue out of context.

We need to know that our laws are compatible with our wider international obligations, and the decision must be taken in the context of the international covenant on civil and political rights and of the European convention on human rights. That is why I asked the Minister about article 4 of the seventh protocol, which relates precisely to this issue. I believe that Finland is the only European Union country that has an exception to double jeopardy. I happened to be there recently, and forgot to ask, but that could easily be confirmed by speaking to people at the embassy. Before concluding our consideration of the issue, we should have the facts about the law in other EU countries and traditional common law jurisdictions, because one can learn and profit from other experiences.

In that context, I was surprised that the Committee did not consider the fact that just over the border to the north of us there is a different criminal law system, which allows three verdicts instead of two—Scotland has the "not proven" verdict. I am not about to make a speech in favour of that option. However, there may be an argument for considering a return to a prosecution only where the previous case concluded, as is allowed under Scottish law, with a "not proven" verdict. Scottish law has had that option for centuries. Although it is sometimes criticised—it allows a cloud to hang over the person on trial—there is no strong view that it should be changed.

Mr. Boateng: Can the hon. Gentleman recall when that verdict was last delivered in Scotland?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman be careful: I am a Scottish justice of the peace.

Mr. Hughes: I asked a Scottish colleague in the House of Lords who is involved in the criminal justice process about that today, and he told me that "not proven" verdicts are delivered several times a year.

I suppose that, like other hon. Members, I should have declared my interests. I am a trained lawyer. The only other relevant information is that I have an ancestor whose first case was a famous murder trial in Edinburgh that resulted in a "not proven" verdict. It happens fairly frequently, and we should consider whether it is relevant to the debate.

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the principal argument in favour of relaxation is the cogency of new evidence, not the doubts arising from the first trial?

Mr. Hughes: I do accept that. That case was well made in the Committee's report and recommendations. I should like to make three final points.

First, I understand the point that was made by the Committee and the Director of Public Prosecutions that one objective of our criminal justice system is to ensure that people who are guilty are convicted, and that one of the perceived failures of the system is that victims sometimes do not receive a fair outcome. Those of us with a background in criminal law have a duty to defend the liberty of the subject and the accused, but the interest of the victim is also an issue. There is sometimes grief and complaint about the system when there is a clear victim and an unanswered question. The Lawrence case is a good example because, clearly, someone or some people committed that terrible crime.

Dr. Ladyman: As a Member with legal training who has carefully studied the Stephen Lawrence case, will the hon. Gentleman suggest whether the Committee's recommendation would have the slightest bearing on the Stephen Lawrence case? My reading of that case, based on the inquiry, is that the strictures recommended by the Committee would not allow it to be reconsidered.

Mr. Hughes: I am cautious about moving on to that ground because, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the police are considering whether any further action can be taken. We are free to comment, but they have not proceeded with another charge and I prefer to leave them to complete their work. I am conscious that the Select Committee's recommendations are not the final word and I hope that the Law Commission is mindful that a live issue concerning justice exists in the Stephen Lawrence case. I have an answer, but I prefer not to comment because I do not want it to be misinterpreted or quoted in part.

The second issue concerning the balance of interest is that we must not forget our duty to ensure that the wrongly accused also have a chance of rehabilitation. We believe in the rehabilitation of people who are properly accused and convicted, but the rehabilitation of those who are wrongly accused is equally important. If there is always the prospect of returning to a case, the possibility of a retrial in a serious case would not facilitate a sense of completeness in the criminal justice system.

My final point is that it was interesting, but surprising, that the Law Commission started by suggesting that offences that might result in a sentence as relatively low in the tariff of seriousness as three years' imprisonment should be the threshold. A three-year prison sentence is not laid down in law—it is merely a choice given by the court from a range of sentences—and does not suggest a degree of seriousness to many people. If the Law Commission is to make a

[Mr. Hughes]

recommendation, I strongly urge it to move in the direction in which I believe that it and the Select Committee are moving, and to recommend that only the most serious offences be included, so that cases of homicide are the most likely to be reopened. I am not saying that to prejudge the view of the Liberal Democrats, but we should not open the box and allow prosecution of a wide range of offences with a wide range of tariffs. The reopening of a case should be an extremely rare exception and the criteria should be laid down and approved only with extreme thoroughness and in rare circumstances.

I end as I began. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester and I will listen to the voices here, and when the Law Commission has produced its report we shall give it proper consideration and come up with a clear view—hopefully before the general election—on whether the law should be changed.

3.44 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): May I express the hope that this sort of debate on the double jeopardy rule will continue in other places? The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) said that he hoped that such a debate could be held in the House. However, in my humble view, it would be a nightmare if it took place during Prime Minister's questions or Home Office questions with the two sides clashing bitterly on whether the rule should be changed.

I do not want to give the wrong impression. I am someone who, when necessary, enjoys being controversial in the House. However, there are subjects that require calmness and a good deal of reflection, and this is one of them. A party battle will not serve the cause of justice.

I am in favour of a change, but I recognise some possible drawbacks. I have no illusions on that score. As the report states, there is a danger that where someone is acquitted, the police will conclude that the court took the wrong decision and continue to pursue that person. Let us consider high-profile cases from some time ago that involved miscarriages of justice. What would have happened in the 1970s if the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four had been acquitted? Here I am putting the opposite view to mine, but it must be taken into account. Given the circumstances, there is perhaps more than a possibility that the police force involved would have decided that the men were clearly guilty and the court was wrong. If the double jeopardy rule had not existed, they may have wished to pursue the matter. Of course, whether they would have been covered by the safeguards recommended by the Law Commission and us is another matter.

I am simply pointing out that, as someone who is in favour of a change, I recognise some of the drawbacks. As we know, some argue that an acquittal is an acquittal and that should be the end of it. However, in cases involving murder, if compelling new evidence comes along—I emphasise the words "compelling new evidence"— the law should surely allow a process that could enable a person to be tried again for the same offence.

No court, let alone one that is trying a case involving the taking of life, should be seen simply as a test of the relative skills of the prosecution and defence. Above all, this is a question of justice, as previous hon. Members have emphasised, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee. Those who have committed the most serious offences of all should not be allowed to get away with it. That is why, speaking as a non-lawyer, I have to a large extent changed my mind in recent years about the double jeopardy rule.

Victim Support says that it is important to victims and their immediate families that justice should be done. One can well understand that view, which Victim Support has strongly upheld and submitted to the Home Affairs Committee. However, perhaps understandably, the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders argues against a change. In a submission that refers to the original Law Commission report, it concludes:

> However, we would oppose any further extension of exceptions to the rule...unless more effective safeguards can be devised than those currently proposed.

It is interesting to note that, although NACRO opposes change, it does not completely and dogmatically rule it out. It opposes change

> unless more effective safeguards can be devised

and I agree that there should be essential safeguards.

In considering any proposed change to the rule, it is important to take note of paragraph 45 of our report. The police and the prosecution authorities alone should not be able to charge a person who has been acquitted. There would have to be a clear process involving the High Court, which would have to decide whether the original acquittal should be taken into account. The prosecution would have to show that the new evidence had not been available at the first trial. A defendant would be able to argue, obviously through his lawyer, that it would be unfair to try him again. The prosecution would have to show that it was highly probable, or that the court was sure, that a jury would convict at a second hearing, and the procedure could be used only once for a second trial, not indefinitely.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: My hon. Friend has touched on the matter that caused me most concern about the report, in which I know he played a considerable part. I am concerned about the burden on the prosecution, when an application is to be made to the Court of Appeal or to the High Court—whichever it is to be—as to the level at which the court may predicate its decision. Is it to be a matter of a probability or certainty of conviction in the mind of the court, or, as the Committee appears to have concluded, of the original acquittal being unsafe? I do not understand what that means. Because of the burden of proof, it is possible to say that a very large number of acquittals are unsafe, if one applies that straightforward test.

Mr. Winnick: I appreciate the manner of my hon. and learned Friend's intervention. Obviously, as a distinguished QC he will no doubt, if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, address the Committee.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a Committee, but a sitting of a Chamber of the House. I can assure the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) that he will catch my eye next.

Mr. Winnick: On the first point I am corrected, and the second will be of great interest to my hon. and

learned Friend. I apologise for my reference to the Committee. All that I can say to my hon. and learned Friend in answer to his question is that there is little that I can add to what is set out in the report. It is very clear. I see that the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Erdington suggests that I draw my hon. Friend's attention to paragraph 41, which states:

we conclude that the test to be applied by the High Court should be whether the new evidence makes the previous acquittal unsafe, thus putting the emphasis on the past acquittal rather than appearing to prejudge any future second trial.

My right hon. Friend the Minister referred to a case in which the person concerned admitted responsibility for the murder. That, of course, is interesting, but I want to refer to another case, in which the relevant person was not tried at the time of the murder. In *The Times* of 30 September there is a report of Ian Lowther being convicted of a murder that took place 23 years ago. He confessed and has been sentenced to life imprisonment. To critics who argue that there should be no change in the law I ask what would have happened if he had been tried at the time of the murder in 1977. He had been questioned several times by the police, but the evidence had not been sufficient to bring him to court.

If he had been tried and acquitted, it would not have been possible to bring him to court later. He was brought to court as a result of DNA testing, which showed that it would have been almost impossible for him not to be responsible for the murder. I accept that if all the advances that have been made in DNA testing had been available, it is quite likely that his guilt would have been discovered at the time. However, if it had not, there would have been no way to convict him, because it would not be possible to charge him again. That aspect of the matter is much in my mind.

Dr. Ladyman: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the double jeopardy law had been relaxed 23 years ago, the prosecution would have been tempted to bring the case to trial before there was sufficient evidence to secure a conviction in the knowledge that, if better evidence appeared later, it could have another stab at the case?

Mr. Winnick: That is one view. I have already mentioned the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four, but one hopes that the police have changed somewhat in the past quarter of a century and do not work on the same cynical basis. My hon. Friend is saying that, if the law were changed, the police would not need to worry too much about certain cases because an acquitted person could be tried at least once again later. I ask him to take note of paragraph 45, which outlines the important safeguards that the High Court must take into account before deciding that new evidence is so compelling as to require an acquitted person to face the court again.

Mr. Corbett: Will my hon. Friend also confirm that it is not even simply a matter of the police and Crown Prosecution Service believing that they have evidence that is more compelling than at the time of the initial trial? As well as that, the High Court has to be persuaded that a particular case can be retried fairly.

Mr. Winnick: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

The murdered person, Mary Gregson, left behind a husband and one child, but her husband died of a heart attack four years after his wife's murder. Her parents did not live to see the killer charged and sentenced. I do not make these points to stir up emotion. We often talk about rights and civil liberties—the very reason we have a Parliament—but we should never forget the rights and liberties that have been taken away from murder victims. My hon. Friends who disagree with changing the rule would surely not disagree with that.

There has been a more recent case of rape, which I wish to draw to the House's attention. It implies a weakening of sorts in the double jeopardy rule. The serial rapist had twice been convicted of rape and acquitted no fewer than five times. On all those occasions, he was defended by the same lawyer. I make no criticism of that lawyer, who was doubtless carrying out his duties—[*Interruption.*] It was certainly not my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway, who need not feel embarrassed.

I repeat that this person had been twice convicted of rape and acquitted no fewer than five times. On the last occasion, the jury were told of his history. That was not allowed until recently on the basis that it would prejudice the trial. The entire history of the accused would otherwise have been unknown to the jury. The Law Lords whether the history should be given to the jury in this particular case, and considered that it should. That is not a direct breach of the double jeopardy rule, because the person was being charged with a new offence with which he had not been charged previously. It nevertheless represents a weakening of the double jeopardy rule to the extent that the jury was told of previous convictions. Was it not right to tell the jury? Was it not right that justice was done—the accused found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment?

Although we recognise the strength of our laws, including the double jeopardy rule, it is important not to be dogmatic. We should not be such purists that we cannot recognise the need for flexibility and change while at the same time recognising that safeguards are essential.

Justice is all important. There is an onus on the defenders of the status quo for the double jeopardy rule to show that justice would be maintained in the sort of cases that the Minister and I have mentioned if the rule were to go. Although I am in favour of the change to the rule, any such change should be on limited grounds with all the safeguards that the Home Affairs Committee pointed out and which were included in the revised letter from the Law Commission to the Select Committee. If those safeguards are applied, there is a good case for changing the double jeopardy rule.

4 pm

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): May I immediately declare an interest? In my time at the bar—which is far too long—I have prosecuted and defended in many of the cases that were envisaged by the Committee and, indeed, in many murder trials. Were this proposal to become legislation I have not the slightest doubt that there would be a significant increase in the work going to my brethren at the bar, resulting in their enrichment. For that reason and others, I oppose it.

[Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews]

There is a fundamental flaw in the approach that the Law Commission took and the Committee then adopted. It lies in the nature of our criminal justice system, which is ancient and eccentric. It is based on trial by battle. It is an adversarial system. Indeed, in mediaeval times it was exactly that: trial by battle. One side hired a thug, the other side hired another thug and they fought it out in an arena. God decided who would win ultimately.

Mr. Corbett: It has not changed then.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: We can immediately see the shadows of our present system. Thugs have been replaced by barristers and God has been replaced by the jury, but the essential elements of the adversarial system remain. We do not have an inquisition. As a result we are concerned not with truth, but with proof. That has always been the basis of our system. It has imperfections. Systems, such as the French one, which are concerned with the discovery of truth, appoint independent magistrates who are employed precisely to ascertain what occurred. We do not have that.

Our system is based on the state proving the case. As a result, a grossly disproportionate strength is immediately observable; the strength of the prosecution compared with that of the defence. It is a completely outweighed contest. We have always sought to redress the balance by a number of rules within our system, of which the most important is the burden and the standard of proof: the prosecution must prove its case. Thus a jury that goes out and considers its verdict and comes to the conclusion that there is the probability of guilt must acquit.

That is the nature of our system. I know that many people find that distressing, especially victims. Often in criminal cases it is clear that there is the probability of guilt, but the adversarial system drives the jury irrevocably towards acquittal. The adversarial system is not between victim and defendant but between state and defendant. The victim in our system has abnegated his right to bring a trial. He can do so in a private prosecution as happened in the Lawrence case, but generally he abnegates that right to the state, which may falter and get it wrong. That is the system in which we operate, and because of that imbalance in power, checks and balances are needed for the defendant. The first of those checks and balances after the burden of proof is finality. Finality is needed because the prosecution—the investigation of crime—is carried out not by independent magistrates, not in a search for the truth, but by the police. The power of the police in the investigation of criminal offences is stronger here than it is in any other country in Europe. For that reason, it is essential that that power is constrained and the constraint is finality.

I have prosecuted with fine police forces, with serious crime and serious fraud squads and the like, and I know that finality is essential. Every time a decision is taken, either by the police or by those who advise them, about whether cases should be brought, the first and most simple element in that decision is, "If we get it wrong this time, that is the end of it, and we cannot come back."

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): What would my hon. and learned Friend say to the victim of rape whose assailant was acquitted because the jury did not think it was beyond reasonable doubt, who hears the rapist bragging in the local pub that he committed the rape and got away with it? What kind of system does not enable such a person, having confessed to the crime, to be prosecuted?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I thought that I had explained that to my hon. Friend. I can tell him that there are very few such instances, but they are, of course, reprehensible, and represent a weakness in our system. However, for every weakness in a system, there is a corresponding strength. It is not the recommendation of the Law Commission or of the Select Committee that someone who brags about a crime may, for that reason, be brought back and tried again. What is being talked about is evidence, and evidence of a confession in the circumstances described by my hon. Friend would be most unlikely to afford a ground in the way proposed.

Mr. Winnick: Probably, such a change in the law would be confined to murder even if there were compelling new evidence. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) has answered the point in his example. What sort of justice can it be for the victim if the rapist is not convicted of the crime that he has committed? What about the case mentioned by the Minister, in which the double jeopardy rule applied, or the case that I mentioned, in which, despite the evidence that came to light after 20 years, if the accused had been acquitted at the time he could not have been charged with the murder of Mary Gregson?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I take my hon. Friend's point and that made by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea, but no system devised by man could ensure perfection on conviction or acquittal.

The Law Commission and the Select Committee recommend that if someone is retried as the result of the abolition of the double jeopardy rule and then acquitted that will be the end of it. A trial can be held no more than twice; the case cannot go on and on. That seems reasonable enough, but what happens after the second acquittal if the accused goes into a pub and boasts that he was guilty? Perfection has not been achieved, but we are not aiming at perfection; we are aiming at a system of justice that balances the state against the individual, not the victim against the individual.

I respect absolutely what the Select Committee said, but that is where its argument is flawed. At the beginning of paragraph 36, the Committee states that

the purpose of the exercise—

the exercise is the trial procedure—

is to convict the guilty

With respect to the draftsmen, that is patently wrong; the purpose of the trial procedure is to prove guilt. It is the purpose of the investigation procedure to convict the guilty, and it is the division between those two parts of our criminal justice system that is being ignored.

I have taken too much time already, so I shall confine my comments to two matters. First, on the seriousness of the cases that could be retried, I understand that murder or the worst types of manslaughter are now, in the view of the Law Commission, the only offences that should be reconsidered. At first, that seems attractive,

but murder is not necessarily the most serious crime on the statute book. I have prosecuted and convicted murderers, and the most obvious examples to cite are cases of mercy killing compared with other cases such as that of a human being who was systematically tortured for several weeks and left with severe mental and physical incapacity. Taking those two cases side by side, there is no doubt which, in the public mind, would be the more serious offence. If the double jeopardy rule is relaxed, its application to any case except murder will prove to be not a lock on the door but a wedge.

The second matter is that of DNA, which is the most attractive argument for relaxing the double jeopardy rule.

Mr. Linton: Does not my hon. and learned Friend accept that in cases of scientific advance or religious conversion a second trial should be allowed?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I shall come to that in a moment. DNA causes me the most concern because it is probably the finest weapon that has ever been devised in the investigation and proof of serious crime, particularly crimes of violence. What causes me, none the less, to maintain my opposition to the proposal is that making the operation of the statute retrospective would be abhorrent to all criminal concepts, and probably contrary to the convention. Crime investigated now has the full benefits of DNA; in serious crime, DNA is always employed. In those circumstances, the problem is avoided.

Mr. Stinchcombe: Is my hon. and learned Friend aware that the Law Commission suggests that DNA evidence should be applied retrospectively?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I had hoped not to indulge in another argument. It seems to me transparent that it would contravene the convention if such retrospective evidence were applied, and it would be a major departure in criminal statutes. However, that is another argument. Even if it were applied retrospectively, as DNA has been an active tool of investigation for so long, the likelihood is that the number of cases involved would be very small.

4.14 pm

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I spent this morning at the Court of Appeal, which finally heard the case of one of my constituents, Richard Mulcahy, who has already spent three years and four months in prison for a robbery that he did not commit. The appeal lasted all of three seconds. As the barrister got to his feet, the judge said, "No need to trouble you any further," and read out the judgment. Counsel for the Criminal Cases Review Commission said that if the evidence available now had been known before the trial, a prosecution would never have taken place. Fingerprints were found on a bin bag in the shop where the robbery took place, and now, three years and four months later, the police are sure that they have a strong case that those fingerprints belong to somebody else. My constituent has now been released. I am happy about that result, as I am happy when any miscarriage of justice is overturned.

However, surely the same considerations that apply to wrongful convictions should also apply to wrongful acquittals. Many people in the legal system appear to be less concerned about wrongful acquittals. There is an old saying that convicting one innocent person is more serious than allowing 10 guilty people to go free. That is an unbalanced approach to justice, which assumes that there is no injured party when there is a wrongful acquittal. A rape victim who knows the person who committed the rape, but is unable to convince a jury, will live the rest of their life in fear because the person remains at liberty and may repeat the crime. When new evidence becomes available—if we are not to take an extraordinarily cavalier attitude to the rights of victims—it is just as much a question of justice that such a person should be dealt with as it is that a person in a case such as that of my constituent, who was wrongfully convicted and spent three years in jail, should be allowed to go free when the case against him or her is demolished.

This is not a question of a difference between lawyers and non-lawyers. Much of the pressure for change has come from lawyers—not only from the Law Commission, but from many eminent academic lawyers. The Committee's report quotes the Society of Public Teachers of Law, which has referred to the growing recognition of the interests of victims within the criminal justice system given that

> the present rules are arguably too absolute in favour of the defendant.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) may find that point of view too difficult to stomach, but I remind him that it is held by academic lawyers.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Will my hon. Friend address the point that there is an imbalance in our system, in that it is based on the prosecution being brought by the state and the defendant being defended by the defence? Are we to move towards a victim-led system—of which Islamic law is one example—in which the victim may dictate not only the prosecution, but, if they wish, on the payment of money, whether there should be a withdrawal of the prosecution; or is it right that the state should make such decisions?

Mr. Linton: I always listen with interest to my hon. and learned Friend speaking on legal matters: he knows the criminal justice and legal system far better than I. As I understand it, the burden of proof is the essential safeguard that is built into the legal system to allow for the superior resources of the prosecution against the defence. That is a very high standard to meet. In police disciplinary cases, for instance, the burden of proof has sometimes been felt to be too high. It is right that in court cases there should be a higher standard of proof—that is the safeguard.

Having the double jeopardy rule as a second safeguard is illogical. It has also given rise to a distasteful development: people who brag about their past offences in the belief that they are beyond punishment.

Mr. Winnick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Linton: In a moment, but I should like to develop my point first.

There are now kill-and-tell memoirs, as opposed to kiss-and-tell memoirs, in which criminals not only boast of their activities but make money out of their crimes,

[Mr. Linton]

which are often murders. One such best-selling author is known as Dodgy Dave Courtney. He was one of the Kray twins' enforcers and has admitted to a murder of which he was acquitted. Roy "Pretty Boy" Shaw described in his biography, which sold well, how he had killed a man with his bare hands. Mad Frank Fraser, a torturer working for the Richardson gang when it ruled south London's gangland, similarly described murders that he had committed.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: They were convicted.

Mr. Linton: There were other murders as well. Kray henchman, Freddie Foreman, described on television how he had murdered Frank Mitchell, the mad axeman—they are all called "mad"—and fed his body to fish in the North sea. He and the Krays were acquitted of that murder. Perhaps the most famous case is that of Ronnie Knight, whom a jury found not guilty of the gangland murder of Alfredo Zomparelli, who was gunned down in the Golden Goose amusement arcade in Soho. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway may remember the case. In his memoirs, which have recently been on the bestseller lists, Ronnie Knight admits that he got away with murder—in this case literally—although he did not pull the trigger himself. Instead, he gave a contract killer a "nice big envelope" to do it.

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend's contribution is as entertaining and well researched as usual. However, does he have one scrap of evidence to suggest that guilty verdicts would have been delivered if the double jeopardy rule had been relaxed in the suggested manner, but the people in question had not confessed? Would not they have merely shut up and never confessed, but still have got away with their crimes?

Mr. Linton: I cannot predict whether they would have confessed later in life. Some people do so, for all sorts of reasons, and there is no reason why they should enjoy immunity. At the very least, such a change might have prevented the obscenity of the Clerkenwell literary festival, where these authors paraded their wealth. In a report about the festival, the *Daily Mirror* stated:

> The star of the evening, however, is Dave Courtney. "Dodgy" Dave arrives in a gleaming white Rolls-Royce flanked by 21 motorcycle outriders.

The newspaper reported that

> Dave organised Ronnie Kray's funeral, has worked as an enforcer and debt collector

and

> has admitted to (but been acquitted of) murder.

It went on to state:

> Charismatic Courtney is the latest underworld figure to swap the prison cell for the Waterstones window display and his memoirs will almost certainly be topping the bestseller lists.

Such books have become a sort of publishing boom, but are based on allowing people to boast of previous crimes. Furthermore, they are not written only by people from the underworld.

Many other people have been acquitted of crimes to which they have later admitted. Another famous case is that of John Duffy, the railway rapist, who was convicted of many serious crimes. He later confessed to the rape of Anne Lock, of whose murder he was acquitted in 1988. However, I was most convinced of the need for change by the case of Billy Dunlop, who was acquitted of the murder of a pizza delivery girl in 1991. Earlier this year, he confessed to the crime, but could not be tried for murder. As my right hon. Friend the Minister knows, he could be tried only for perjury. He was convicted, but it is extraordinary that the victim's family had to suffer the past 10 years before they could get him behind bars. The mother and father of the victim spoke of how

> following his acquittal for murder, Dunlop had boasted to his pals that he had committed the perfect murder.

Mr. Ming said:

> He boasted about it in the pubs and people used to ring us up and tell us.

Yet it was 10 years before the police finally managed to bring charges, and even then, they were only charges of perjury.

Of course, those ex-mobsters might be embellishing their tales to sell more books. However, I cannot think of any reason why a jury should not be allowed to make that decision. I fully support the recommendation of the Committee that we should allow retrials, at least for serious offences.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: The hon. Gentleman has not quite addressed the question that was put. If there is a change to the law, is he suggesting that the number of people who have now confessed to their crimes—rightly or wrongly—would still do so? If they would not, what point is the hon. Gentleman making?

Mr. Linton: We do not know the answer to that question. It would be up to the Director of Public Prosecutions to decide whether to reopen a case, and it would be up to the police to bring those confessions to court. However, at present, criminals are boasting about crimes that they have committed previously, believing that they have immunity. That seems inherently wrong. However, I cannot predict what will happen when this rule is changed.

I readily acknowledge that there are dangers. We do not want the police to pursue a suspect unfairly, nor do we want a prosecutor to retry the same suspect several times in the hope that some jury will convict him. That is why we should allow retrials for only the most serious offences—those that can attract a life sentence—and, I would suggest, not only for murder, but for manslaughter, rape and robbery. We should also make it a condition that there should be new evidence that was not available at the first trial, and which makes the previous acquittal unsafe.

I do not see why we should rule out new evidence that could have been adduced with due diligence at the first trial, as the Law Commission originally proposed. If the police missed a fingerprint, or failed to interview a witness, why should a court not be allowed to consider the fresh evidence? In the case of my constituent, the fact that the police missed a fingerprint led eventually to his appeal being upheld. Why, if it were the other way round, should that not also obtain? For instance, if police investigating a robbery in a car showroom had failed, for whatever reason—perhaps through

incompetence, negligence, or stupidity—to look for fingerprints on the car next to the stolen car, but had found them later, could those fingerprints never be used, even though they would constitute very powerful evidence? If so, we would be letting the criminal justice system off the hook.

The Law Society made a point in its evidence about incomplete investigation, which I found very unconvincing. It argued that

> A police force would allow a trial to go ahead following an incomplete investigation, in the belief that if they did not succeed in obtaining a conviction, the investigation could be continued and they could go back to court with further evidence.

It seems most unlikely that the police bringing a serious case against someone, knowing that they had to satisfy the very high standards of proof required in criminal cases, would go to court with only half a case, or without having looked for the available evidence. I find that very implausible. The high standard of proof required is the crucial test in our legal system. Is the idea that one cannot have a retrial in which there is fresh evidence meant to be a kind of incentive or punishment for the police, to make sure that they work very hard when bringing the case in the first place? That punishment would fall not on the police, but on the victim or the victim's family. It is they who suffer in the case of a wrongful acquittal, especially if that wrongful acquittal cannot be put right.

The Law Commission originally shrank from making any recommendation about whether the relaxation of the double jeopardy rules should apply retrospectively. I am interested in what my hon. Friends have to say about that. We think that it should apply retrospectively. As I understand it, the principle is that it would be wrong to change the law so that someone is punished retrospectively for doing something that was not an offence at the time. However, we are talking about people who knew that they were committing crimes, lied in court and got away with it. Such cases are entirely different from those with which the retrospectivity principle intends to deal in law.

Of course, the law does allow retrial in restricted cases. At the very least, the Law Commission would like retrials where scientific advance brings new evidence to light, where religious conversion, for example, brings forward a fresh witness who would not give evidence at the first trial, and in instances of jury nobbling. Those are the basic cases where retrials should be allowed. More generally, where there is new and strong evidence that renders the previous court finding unsafe—a phrase that is perfectly understandable in layman's terms—it ought to be possible to bring someone back to justice.

I find the way in which the legal system uses the double jeopardy principle very strange. Doctors famously bury their own mistakes, and it seems that lawyers use double jeopardy to prevent wrongful acquittal from resulting in a retrial, which could expose the incompetence of the police or the prosecutors. That is hidden for ever from the public gaze, thanks to the principle of double jeopardy. It is nice to present double jeopardy purely as a defence for the wronged individual, but I suspect that it is deeply ingrained in the legal system.

When we gathered evidence from the Law Society and, in particular, the Bar Council, it struck me that some people seemed more familiar with the accused than the victim. If we pursue the logical precept that the legal system must be seen as clearly from the victim's point of view as from that of the accused, we must surely conclude that a wrongful acquittal is as bad as a wrongful conviction. The double jeopardy rule gets in the way of exposing wrongful acquittals, and it should be relaxed.

4.33 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) seemed to argue for a change in the law to prevent boasting, but I heard nothing in the examples that he gave to suggest that justice would be done. If I have learned one thing in this life, it is that anyone whose nickname contains the word "mad" is not stupid enough to confess while there is still the possibility of his being tried.

We have heard an argument for relaxing the double jeopardy rule that would put at risk our entire criminal justice system, simply to stop people making money from boasting later in life, after they have got away with the crime. If that issue is our real concern, by all means let us introduce a Bill that will allow the state to sue someone for the proceeds of boasting—the money from their books and memoirs—but let us not change the balance of our criminal legal system in a manner that would seriously jeopardise the interests of innocent people.

Mr. Linton: I return to the Dunlop case, in which the man boasted in local pubs in the north-east that he had committed the perfect murder. Does my hon. Friend believe that it would have been better if that person could have been tried for the murder of which he was acquitted instead of merely for perjury?

Dr. Ladyman: I certainly understand the Minister's argument that, from the victim's family's point of view, finding someone guilty of perjury is a different matter from finding him guilty of murder or rape. However, as long as that person receives the same punishment, whatever crime he is subsequently tried for, I am prepared to accept that our present imperfect system is at least an improvement on the alternative, which is to relax the double jeopardy rule with the result that substantially more innocent people would be convicted.

I shall quote a case to illustrate my point. I shall not name the accused, but it is a matter of public record and many right hon. and hon. Members will know the name. A murder took place on Wimbledon common several years ago and the accused was acquitted. On the steps of the court, the police told the television cameras and the world that they were not looking for anyone else in connection with that case. They believed that the jury had made an astonishing cock-up and that the accused was guilty. Can anyone in this Chamber assure me that if the double jeopardy rule had been relaxed, that man would not have been back in court a few months later? The police would have put all their efforts into finding another witness.

Mr. Corbett: I take my hon. Friend's point, but the argument cannot be telescoped so neatly. The Home Affairs Committee is arguing that there must be compelling new evidence and that a court—

Mr. Winnick: The High Court.

Mr. Corbett: It is arguing that the High Court must be persuaded that the new evidence is compelling and that

[Mr. Corbett]

it is possible in the circumstances for a new trial to be fair. It does not help the argument to put it all together within an inch when there is a mile in it.

Dr. Ladyman: I accept my hon. Friend's argument that there must be new evidence, but I suggest that, in the case to which I referred, new evidence—perhaps a new witness—would have been found to bring the case rapidly back to court. The police were convinced that a guilty man had been acquitted. We now know that there are serious doubts about the attitude of the police in that case. Relaxation of the double jeopardy law would have enabled an injustice to be done.

I want to declare my interest in the matter. I am not a lawyer and, with respect to the lawyers who are present, I cannot think of a worse way of earning a living. However, I hope to go through life without committing a serious offence and if I ever find myself in court for a serious offence, it will be as an innocent man accused. I would want to know that the odds of defending myself are in my favour and that when I have defended myself and been acquitted, that will be the end of the matter. That is the least that we should all expect from the legal system.

In his evidence to the Select Committee the Director of Public Prosecutions explained how the double jeopardy rule came about, but, with the greatest respect, I am not sure that he made it forcefully enough. We have the double jeopardy rule because the state is hugely powerful. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) said—he has had to leave his place for a moment— the state is responsible for prosecutions in this country. The state is hugely powerful and the individual is very weak. Relatively speaking, the state is all-powerful, so we must build protection into the system. That protection is in the form of principles, which give the individual, who is weak, a fighting chance.

Mr. Winnick: Of course he is innocent. No one doubts that for a moment, but is my hon. Friend saying that he would be happy if someone were acquitted on the most serious charges and then compelling new evidence came to light? Why should a case be finalised simply by the acquittal? He talks about the state, but this is a democracy. Should we work on the basis that the state has no wish other than to see that justice is done? There is a difference between living in a democracy and living in a totalitarian state. Of course there have been miscarriages of justice, but why should the state more or less conspire against the individual unless the police and prosecution authorities believe that there is sufficient evidence that someone has committed the offence?

Dr. Ladyman: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for introducing the word that I was about to use—democracy. One reason why we live in a democracy is that we have established principles that protect the weak individual against the all-powerful state. We accept that there is a cost for those principles, one of which is that guilty people will occasionally go free. Nevertheless, it is an important principle, which defends our rights in our democracy, because we weight our legal criminal system in favour of the accused—the person who must defend himself.

The other principles that we employ are taken for granted. One is the presumption of innocence: the state must make its case and prove it. The threshold of proof is another: the state must make its case beyond all reasonable doubt, not just on the balance of probabilities in a criminal case. Those principles weight the criminal system in favour of the defendant to ensure that we all have a fighting chance.

Mr. Stinchcombe: Those principles, which give the accused a fighting chance or more than that, would not be affected at all by relaxing the double jeopardy rule. They would still protect the accused.

Dr. Ladyman: I simply do not accept that. We would be tipping the balance. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway said, relaxing the rule would be a wedge in the door and would erode those fundamental principles. If we are prepared to review our entire criminal legal system and consider the possibility of eventually introducing an inquisitorial system—as exists in France—let us start that debate, but not by chipping away at the principles that are the pillar on which the current system is built.

Mr. Corbett: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Ladyman: I shall make a little progress, because another colleague wants to contribute to the debate.

Those principles underpin the whole system. We have entered into what I regard as an unstated contract between the citizen and the state. In my mind, as a layperson, we have laws to protect us as individuals from the actions of other individuals and when those laws are broken, we want to see the guilty punished.

I accept entirely what my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) said about the need to punish the guilty, but it is important that the courts do not, wrongly, punish the innocent. To ensure that that does not happen and that the state does not misuse its powers to oppress individuals, we err on the side of the defendant. We make conviction a difficult process. Part of our contract with the state is that the guilty will sometimes go unpunished, because that is preferable, in order to minimise the number of occasions on which the innocent are punished. We accept that contract. I believe that, if we want to renegotiate part of it, we must renegotiate all of it.

The principle of double jeopardy is as fundamental as the presumption of innocence or the threshold of proof. Anyone who believes that we shall not move further down the road of relaxing the principle once we start, should read today's debate. It has moved from the idea of relaxing the double jeopardy rule for a crime serious enough to receive a three-year sentence to the Select Committee's idea that it should be relaxed for a crime serious enough to warrant a life sentence. The Law Commission is saying that murder and reckless manslaughter should be the test. That will not stand the test of time. Once we relax the principle, another high-profile case in the near future will force people to re-address the issue.

Mr. Winnick: Betting.

Dr. Ladyman: One or two parliamentary colleagues appear to have got into trouble recently over betting,

but I would be prepared to bet hon. and right hon. Members that, if we relax the rule as the Committee suggests, within 10 years a horrific crime, possibly involving rape or incitement to racial violence, will not fit the established criteria and people will call for the rule to be relaxed further. Eventually, we shall end up with the Law Commission's original suggestion of crimes involving a prison sentence of three years.

Mr. Winnick: My hon. Friend is making an eloquent case for the maintenance of the status quo. He seems to believe that no change is needed in the criminal law. I mentioned a rape case that did not involve a change in the double jeopardy rule as such. Should the jury not have been told about the previous acquittals? That change required a decision by the Law Lords.

Dr. Ladyman: Without knowing the details of the case, I cannot give an opinion. However, I do not believe that the criminal law is entirely immutable; we can adjust practice on occasion. In the case mentioned by my hon. Friend, the Law Lords expressed the view that it was right and proper to bring additional information to the court and make it available to the jury. On the face of it, that was reasonable. However, that is a very different matter from undermining one of the fundamental principles that currently weight the court system in favour of the defendant. If we tip the balance too far, serious dangers will arise.

Let me give one or two additional reasons why that approach is inherently dangerous. The debate on double jeopardy began as a result of the Stephen Lawrence case. The inquiry argued that that aspect of the law should be reviewed. Having considered the exceptions and restrictions suggested by the Law Commission and the Select Committee, I seriously doubt whether relaxing the rule will lead to any change in the Stephen Lawrence case. The Director of Public Prosecutions and other authorities acting on behalf of the Crown did not want to proceed with the case, because they knew that it was unlikely to succeed. Their professional advice was, "Let's build a stronger case. Let's be patient and we'll get our man in the end." That advice was ignored, so we must not pin the blame for the fact that those responsible for the death of Stephen Lawrence have not been punished on the double jeopardy law and say that it must be relaxed.

What should have happened in the Lawrence case was what happened in the case mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North. The Crown did not proceed in the case of that killing for 23 years, until it had a sufficiently strong case to be sure of conviction. That is the correct way to proceed in a case that is not sufficiently strong initially to secure a conviction. People must wait patiently and build a case.

The police gave another piece of telling evidence to the Committee. When asked, they said that not many cases would be affected by relaxing the double jeopardy rule, echoing the DPP, although the number that they gave was slightly higher. That is because cases are taken no further when someone is acquitted. In other words, it is no longer accepted that the person is innocent: the police will not carry on to discover someone else who could be guilty of the crime, but assume that the person was guilty in the first place. Once the double jeopardy change comes into effect, the police need look no further. In future, every single acquittal will lead to further investigation of the same person, providing the police with further opportunities to get their man. That is a telling insight into the police's attitude to the relaxation. I would be worried about that if it went ahead.

Mr. Corbett: Mr. David Phillips, the chief constable of Kent, when giving evidence about homicide cases that are not resolved by a conviction, said:

> We never close the case: we used to, because there used to be reports that were termed "closing reports". But, when we recently constructed the homicide manual, we decided the proper course of action was to say that there should be periodical reports which indicate the status of the investigation.

My hon. Friend's point does not apply to all cases and all circumstances.

Dr. Ladyman: I reiterate the logic behind that evidence. If the police seriously intend to keep an open mind after all cases of acquittal, the chief constable should have been able to answer the question put to him, as to how many cases a year that will involve. He should have provided a precise figure. He should have been able to say what the DPP said and offered to provide the figures in a note later. I do not accept that the police assume that these cases will remain open: the police are far more likely to assume simply that the jury made a mistake. Various cases provide clear evidence of that.

I shall conclude my comments to allow other hon. Members to take part in the debate. The key issue is clear: if we start to undermine the basic principles of our criminal justice system, we must review everything—including the adversarial system itself. We weight the system in favour of the defendant. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway pointed out, it used to be a battle in which people would hire warriors to decide the outcome and leave it in the hands of God. The state is all-powerful: under the old rules, the state has Lennox Lewis at its disposal, but the defendant can hire people only as good as Joe Bugner. If Joe Bugner lands a lucky punch and knocks Lennox Lewis down, in future we are going to allow Lennox Lewis to get up, have a rest and come back with a gang of friends to have another go at the defendant. We are talking about a fundamental rewriting of the principles of the criminal legal system as we understand them in this country. I greatly hope that the House will not go down that road.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I reassure hon. Members that Mr. William Hill is not an Officer of the House?

4.53 pm

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): I shall make a brief contribution to this important debate on the double jeopardy rule—the long-standing principle that no one should be tried for the same offence twice. At the outset, I also declare an interest as a barrister and past student of Islamic law. Although I never practised criminal law, I was once the junior to the chairman of the Law Commission and have been a pupil in the chambers of a law commissioner.

I mention that because the inquiry and report of the Home Affairs Committee was itself prompted by the Law Commission—in particular by its consultation

[Mr. Paul Stinchcombe]

paper on double jeopardy published in October last year and subsequently by the recommendations of Sir William Macpherson and the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. In its consultation paper, the Law Commission recommended a relaxation of the double jeopardy rule in certain narrow circumstances. We considered that recommendation and agreed that change was necessary—that the double jeopardy rule should be relaxed, albeit with refinements on the Law Commission's recommendations.

I want to set out in my remarks first why I believe that the ancient rule needs to be relaxed, and secondly where and why I depart from the Law Commission, at least with respect to its initial recommendations, as to the circumstances in which the relaxation could operate. I agree that double jeopardy is an ancient rule. It dates back about 800 years in our common law tradition and, before that, to Roman law. It is not just ancient, but ingrained. Its purpose was civilising. It was to protect the citizen from the oppression of the state, to prevent the machinery of the state from repeatedly attempting to convict an individual, to prevent the oppression of such a man or woman, and to protect him or her from the repeated stress, expense and ordeal of repeated trial. We should think on that for a while.

That common law rule was born 800 years before we passed the Human Rights Act 1998. It was born in an age of trial not just by battle but by torture, an age of absolute monarchs. Yet it was born to protect the human rights of citizens. In those circumstances, it is hardly to be discarded lightly, without deep reflection. I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes): we need a compelling case before we suggest amendments. However, after mature reflection on the arguments, I believe that such a compelling case has been made.

The case can best be made by reference to the historical context to which I have referred. After all, rather a lot happens in 800 years. Indeed, with the pace of change accelerating through modern technology, rather a lot has happened in just the past eight years. Centuries ago we did not have the advantage of contemporary forensic science. No second trial, all those years ago, could bring forth missed or misunderstood evidence capable of proving that a person was present at the scene of a crime and that his or her alibi was false. No second prosecution in the previous century, let alone in mediaeval times, could determine someone's identity from a spot of blood too small for the human eye to see. It would not have been possible to find that spot of blood.

All that has changed. Forensic scientists are now capable of assisting the judicial process in ways that would have been unimaginable to our forefathers. First came fingerprinting, then genetic fingerprinting—DNA testing. In the future there will be corneal and facial mapping and enhanced closed circuit television pictures.

When such evidence can prove conclusively the innocence of someone accused of a crime, it is, quite properly, admissible, because the innocent should not be convicted. When it can prove conclusively the innocence of someone previously found guilty of a crime, again, quite properly, it is admissible so that an appeal against conviction can succeed. Given those circumstances, on what possible basis can it be argued that when the same kind of evidence, of identical weight and identical probative value, can help to prove the guilt of someone previously found innocent, our criminal justice system must always, none the less, ignore it? Surely it is not for fear that a second trial could never be fair, because we already allow for retrials. They can be fair, especially if the emphasis of the test in law looks back rather than forward to whether the original acquittal was unsafe, without prejudging the outcome of a second trial.

Dr. Ladyman: My hon. Friend is making an eloquent case. As a scientist, the one area on which I have an open mind is that of incontrovertible new scientific evidence, which makes me feel that there is a case to be discussed. However, if that is the issue, why did the Committee not limit the proposed relaxation of the double jeopardy law to cases in which incontrovertible, new, physical, scientific evidence, which was not available at the original trial, would be applicable? I would be much happier about that than about the broad relaxation that is proposed.

Mr. Stinchcombe: At least I am happy that we may be persuading my hon. Friend about a limited relaxation of this important principle.

I shall deal with the arguments that have been raised against the suggestion. First, there is the fear that a second fair trial would not be possible. We can have second fair trials. It is suggested that the police would be lackadaisical in their investigations. Have we sunk so low in our cynicism to believe that the police would not investigate properly and would then proceed to prosecute improperly simply because of this relaxation of the rule? We are then told that we should still fear the over-zealous prosecutor. Hundreds of years ago, when the rule became enshrined in our common law tradition that made a lot of sense. We did not then have the human rights legislation or advanced rules of fair procedure. A repeat prosecution could be a genuine tool of oppression by the state. Now we have protections against that happening.

Most importantly of all, and coming back to the point that my hon. Friend has just made, hundreds of years ago a repeat prosecution could not yield the forensic evidence that it can now. Conclusive evidence of guilt can now be brought forward. If the criminal justice system, through direct operation of the law itself, fails to allow such evidence to be adduced, it fails to achieve one of its two principal purposes: not just to protect the innocent, but to protect the innocent from the guilty. When that happens, even worse follows because the criminal justice system itself falls into disrepute. That is not an idle fear: it is a real fear. Just imagine the horrific scenarios that could so easily arise as parents of raped and murdered sons and daughters are told conclusively by scientists that their children's killers are walking free. That to my mind is genuinely a vista too hideous to contemplate.

The time for this ancient rule to change has come. Science has moved on. The law should catch up with it, especially because we now have other protections for the human rights of the accused. There should be limitations on that relaxation. It would not be right, for example, to relax the rule for all crimes. The public

would not be well served by clogging courts with retrials of minor offences. The spectre hanging over many acquitted people would be unjustifiable. Where do we draw the line? The Law Commission originally suggested that it be drawn below those offences likely to attract a prison sentence of three years or more. That seems wholly unworkable. It requires conjecture as to possible sentence before guilt has even been established. That cannot conceivably be right.

The Law Commission now suggests that the line should be drawn below murder and reckless killing. I disagree with that too. Think of the offences that would thereby be excluded, such as aggravated burglary and rape. A serial rapist who breaks into the homes of women and children to assault them in their bedrooms would walk free even when we know from conclusive scientific evidence who he is. That cannot be right. Until I am persuaded otherwise, I believe that the threshold should be exactly where the Select Committee recommended it should be, so that any offence that could carry a life sentence could also be retried in appropriate circumstances.

I also disagree with two other of the Law Commission's original recommendations, although I believe that it may have moved towards the Select Committee's position. First, it recommended that a "due diligence" condition should attach to any relaxation of the rule so that new evidence could be admitted at a second trial only if it could not, with due diligence, have been adduced at the first. That means that if the police had failed to investigate a murder properly and had thereby failed to discover critical evidence of guilt before trial one, no retrial could be permitted, however conclusive of guilt that new evidence might be. That again cannot be right when one recognises the origins of the debate in the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. It would mean that the victim or the victim's family would suffer injustice twice, once at the hands of incompetent police officers and then at the hands of the justice system itself. It would mean even more than that. It would mean that the second injustice would be suffered precisely because of the incompetence of the police officers. That is not tenable in a modern society.

Finally, but with more caution, I do not agree with the Law Commission's original recommendation that the relaxation of the double jeopardy rule should not have retrospective effect. I am always slow to support retrospective enforcement, but I can conceive of nothing more self-evidently appropriate than where the sole purpose of the legislation in question is to prevent past miscarriages of justice. The double jeopardy rule has been an integral part of our criminal legal system for many centuries, but the time has now come to relax it in order better to protect the integrity of the system and of the citizens of this country. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway rightly said that we could never have a perfect judicial or criminal justice system, but we can have a better one, and this is one improvement that we should make.

5.5 pm

Mr. Boateng: Unlike the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), I am not and never have been an opponent of the experiment that sees debates such as this conducted in this Chamber. I have sat through and contributed to a number of them. I am bound to say, however, that I have never sat through or heard a better debate in this Chamber than that in which we have been privileged to participate this afternoon. If ever there was a justification for the existence of a Chamber—and, in my view, for the right of Select Committees to ensure that their reports are debated on the Floor of the House—this afternoon has proved it. The balance of the argument has fallen in favour of hon. Members whose proposals for the resolution of this issue are along the lines of those of the Select Committee and of the interim findings of the Law Commission. That is not surprising, as the Select Committee was so well represented by the hon. Members who have spoken this afternoon.

None the less, I do not intend to express a view one way or the other. Views were put strongly and with conviction on the other side of the argument, by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) and by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). The argument will run for some time. On the Government's behalf, I urge any who take an interest in our proceedings to engage with the argument if they feel a desire to do so. Such people should make representations to the Government, who are anxious to ensure that we proceed with the widest possible consultation. The work of the Select Committee has helped enormously. The Law Commission has indicated an interest in the contributions that have been made during today's debate and will take them into consideration as it prepares its final report.

One or two things struck me forcibly from this good debate. Obviously, one of them was the introduction given by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), who ably represented the balance and force of the arguments advanced in the Select Committee report. I was struck also by the passion expressed on behalf of the victims by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). Important contributions were also made by a number of other hon. Members. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway expounded his argument with his usual robustness. It is a pity that he was not in his place to hear the comprehensive and forensic dissection of his arguments provided by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe). That was a job well done, if I may say so as a mere observer. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway would have done well to hear that contribution, and I hope that his attention is drawn to it. I shall certainly do so, and I shall long remember it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) made an important contribution. As a lawyer myself, I shall particularly remember the suggestion that doctors bury their mistakes, while we lawyers merely connive in their acquittal, and that the public suffer either way. That was a very powerful image indeed.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet seems to have little time for lawyers and cannot think of a worse way of earning a living. He was good enough to share with us the various things that he would want to know if he were an innocent man accused of a crime.

[Mr. Boateng]

Having heard my hon. Friend, the first thing that he would probably want to know was the name of a good lawyer.

Mr. Winnick: Are you offering?

Mr. Boateng: We hear what he says, and we take his attack on the legal profession with a pinch of salt. [*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for Erdington says that he need look no further than my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, and there is much force in that argument.

It has been a good debate that has contributed to our understanding of the issues, and I add my voice to those who have thanked the members and Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee for making it possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twelve minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 31 October 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Pensioner Poverty (London)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

10 am

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I start the debate by noting that not as many hon. Members are present in the Chamber to discuss pensioner poverty in London as I would have liked, but let us hope that more will come and join in the debate as we proceed. It is an important topic and one that we should spend some time discussing, not least because next Wednesday the Chancellor of the Exchequer will make his pre-Budget statement to the House. In July, the right hon. Gentleman announced an additional £43 billion of investment in public services through the comprehensive spending review, a great deal of which I welcome—especially the investment in health and education. However, not a penny more was announced for pensioners—in a year when their basic state pension has risen by only 75p. We know that the Prime Minister has got the message about the anger that pensioners feel about that miserly increase, but the question is whether the Chancellor can now assure us that the Government have understood it.

As a London Member of Parliament, I make no apology for making London the focus of this morning's debate. I am not saying that pensioner poverty elsewhere is any less of an issue. Indeed, some of Government's own indicators show that that is clearly not so. However, one indicator of pensioner poverty overshadows all others. More pensioners die in London as a result of the cold than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. According to the warm homes campaign, on average 5,486 London pensioners die prematurely each year due to the cold. Research recently published in the *British Medical Journal* found that London had the worst record for cold-related deaths anywhere in Western Europe. Even when compared with Scandinavia where the winters are longer and harsher, London comes out worse.

Research makes it clear that the cold will continue to cause thousands of deaths every winter unless effective steps are taken to improve protection against it. When reading such facts alongside the results of the 1996 English house condition survey, which shows that one in five pensioners lives in poor housing and that a higher concentration of that poor housing is in the oldest parts of London—mainly inner London—we begin to see how such conditions make matters worse.

An important part of the picture is not only poor housing but isolation. One in three of London's older people lives alone, which is above the national average. In its report on isolation and older people, Age Concern London stated:

> Isolation in old age is commonly associated with frail, housebound older people but it is in fact more widespread. Older people find themselves isolated in a range of circumstances—their isolation may be triggered by the death of a partner or the loss of close friends, by a change in culture or social situation, or by a loss of health or mobility.

Those who are most likely to live alone are elderly women. Moreover, older people in inner London are more likely to live alone than their outer London contemporaries. The Sutton seniors forum is an active pensioners group in my outer London constituency. It holds meetings each month at which more than 200 to 300 seniors discuss a range of issues. From a survey of its members, the forum found that 10 per cent. of pensioners never received visits from friends or members of their family and that as many as 50 per cent. of those pensioners were visited only occasionally. The chairman of the forum, David Dombey, said that that was

> a terrible indictment of today's society.

I agree. Isolation increases vulnerability. It can fuel the mental and physical decline that, in turn, leads to crisis and even premature death. The impact of isolation on older people, and the need for a multi-agency approach to tackle the complex range of causes, warrants a debate of its own. There is certainly no time to do the subject justice today.

Organisations such as Age Concern London and others do much to highlight the issues and to develop and promote good practice on the ground. I want to focus on one of the causes of isolation, which is pensioner poverty—the subject of our debate. It does not take a genius to link London's appalling death toll with fuel poverty and its concentration among the older population. According to the 1996 English house condition survey, 52 per cent. of single pensioner households have to spend more than 10 per cent. of their income to achieve satisfactory indoor heating. The only way to tackle fuel poverty and poor housing, and to cut winter deaths, is to raise pensioner incomes.

This is not the first time that I have highlighted pensioner poverty in the House. I was fortunate enough to secure a debate on the issue early last year. Since then, the Select Committee on Social Security has cast its critical eye on pensioner incomes. Its report puts on record many key facts that should inform this debate and many others in this place on the subject.

There is no such thing as a typical pensioner. Statistical averages mask at least as much as they inform. The Select Committee found that the bulk of pensioners were in the bottom half of incomes, and that there was a widening gap between the relatively few rich pensioners and the rest. The majority of pensioners during the past 20 years have not become well off. The poorest have seen their incomes rise by less than half the rate of the better-off. The gap between the better-off and less well-off pensioner has much to do with age and length of time in retirement.

Older pensioners, even those fortunate enough to have a second pension such as an occupational pension, have fallen behind people who have retired more recently, let alone the wider population. Index-linking the basic state pension and occupational pensions to prices has eroded their value, and will continue to erode them. Using evidence from the National Pensioners Convention, the Select Committee's report identified a difference of £54 a week between the incomes of a recently retired person and someone aged over 75.

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

Beyond that gap is the fact that the oldest pensioners tend to be women. Half of women pensioners in London—310,000—receive less than the full rate of basic state pension. Of those, 186,000 receive a pension of only £40.50 a week, and a further 93,000 receive even less. That is due to broken contribution records. As a result, many women rely on their husbands' contribution records to claim a full spouse basic pension set at 60 per cent. of the full personal basic pension.

I am sure that the Minister will point to the minimum income guarantee and the Government's take-up campaign. As I meet older people in my constituency, I take every opportunity to encourage them to avail themselves of that provision. However, figures from Age Concern England show that as many as 120,000 pensioners in London are entitled to the minimum income guarantee, but are not receiving it.

In 1998, a Department of Social Security report called "Helping Pensioners: Contextual Survey of the Income Support Pilot Areas" drew on 10 pilots in various parts of the country and found that 40 per cent. of pensioners would definitely make a claim. However, it also found that 36 per cent. would not make a claim in any circumstances, for reasons such as stigma, uncertainty and an unwillingness to deal with the Benefits Agency. Therefore, we can begin to question a strategy that relies so much on the minimum income guarantee.

The people who do not claim and will not claim are, according to the Department's own research, the poorest of our pensioners. They will derive no help from MIG. The non-claimers are older pensioners; six out of 10 non-claimers are over 75. It seems strange that a take-up campaign should fail to look for entitlement to benefits such as attendance allowance, which extends a person's entitlement to a minimum income guarantee.

The Select Committee also highlights the difficulties faced by ethnic minorities in terms of pensions, which is an especially appropriate topic in a debate focusing on London. Sadly, there is a dearth of information about the extent of pensioner poverty among ethnic minority groups. Given that London will see an 80 per cent. increase in ethnic older people between 1996 and 2006, it is vital that more research be undertaken by the Department to ensure that the take-up campaigns are properly tailored to deliver the extra help that is needed, especially if the evidence from the Minority Ethnic Black Elder Strategic Alliance is correct. Last year, it reported that 67 per cent. of black and other ethnic minority elders received a pension, compared with 88 per cent. of their white peers. The only way in which we can help the poorest pensioners—those who miss out on the minimum income guarantee—is by giving a substantial boost to the basic state pension.

The Government's own research shows that that is what people want. According to research report No. 83 on pensions and retirement planning, almost no one wants the state to withdraw from pension provision. On the provision of a basic foundation pension, the research found that the fairness, universality and dependability of the basic state pension counted for a lot. The research bears out the views of many of the members of the Sutton seniors forum and many other pension campaigners across London. The research document states:

> Most people feel that a state pensioner should not need to claim income support—indeed, they see this as paradoxical.

That is right, yet Government policy is driving more pensioners into means-testing. Indexing the minimum income guarantee to earnings while the basic state pension remains tied to prices will, year by year, increase dependency on means-testing.

The basic state pension is set to rise next April by at least £2.25, but that will do little or nothing to arrest the long-term decline in its value. I want to make it clear that, unlike the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats are not calling for the winter fuel payments, free television licence or Christmas bonus to be scrapped to pay for an increase in the basic state pension. Those payments and concessions should continue, because they are making a difference.

The November issue of *Saga Magazine* reports that, when the details of the pension plans proposed by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) are explained in detail to its readers, 72 per cent. reject them out of hand. It is worth bearing in mind that pensioners have seen through the Conservatives' plans and understand that they are not being offered new money, but that this is the first case of robbing Peter to pay Peter. When the plans are boiled down to their core, we find that pensioners would receive just 42p on top of the £2.25 inflation increase next April. A real increase is needed. Pensioners need extra cash, not smoke and mirrors.

This year, Age Concern published work that it had commissioned from the Family Budget Unit, which set out to measure objectively the level of pension required to achieve a low-cost but adequate standard of living. The point is that a pension should do more than simply keep pensioners alive; it should add life to those years and enable older people to take part and pride in their community, not feel shut out and isolated. The FBU research suggests that a single pensioner needs £90 a week and a couple needs £135 to avoid living in poverty. I hope that the Government will incorporate that approach in their strategy for tackling pensioner poverty. The research seemed to persuade the Select Committee.

I am delighted that the Minister has taken down from the shelves the Department's copy of the Liberal Democrat manifesto for the 1997 general election. I am sure that reference will be made to it. It is correct that the position taken by the Liberal Democrats at the previous election is not dissimilar to that taken by the Government in the past three years, particularly on targeting extra help through the minimum income guarantee. However, I think that we put our hands up and admitted that we got our policy wrong. We have reviewed it; it is right to keep policies under review.

We increasingly take the view that targeting extra help through the basic state pension is the right way forward. Given the erosion of its value, an across-the-board increase is needed now to halt the decline. That increase should be at least £5 on top of inflation. However, given the clear evidence that old age and poverty go hand in hand, the Government must go further. Targeting extra help on older pensioners through the basic state pension is far more cost-effective than relying on means-testing. Evidence about fuel poverty reinforces that view. The 1991 English house

condition survey found that eight out of 10 people over 80 were living in fuel poverty. The 1996 house condition survey suggested that that figure had improved. The winter fuel allowance may have improved it further, but not enough.

Age additions are not new to our social security system. Since 1971, pensioners have received, at the age of 80, the princely sum of an extra 25p on their basic state pension. Twenty-five pence was worth something in 1971, but today it does not even pay for a first-class stamp. In his evidence to the Social Security Committee, the Minister of State, Department of Social Security, who has responsibility for pensions, rightly described that 25p as a festering sore on the social security system. However, the Government would be wrong if they concluded that they should scrap that provision; instead, they should increase it substantially to at least £10 a week. Six out of 10 of those eligible for but not claiming the minimum income guarantee are 75 and over; there should be a new age addition at 75 of at least £5 a week.

Those proposals are affordable, and the Select Committee has shown one way in which they could be paid for—by applying some of the £3 billion surplus in the national insurance fund. Indeed, the Department of Social Security research note No. 83 is also helpful on that matter. Most participants in that research favoured raising the basic state pension to between £80 and £120 a week for a single person. When asked about the cost, working participants said that they were willing to pay more in national insurance to fund a pension increase of £10 a week, or even a £20 to £30 increase.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that the surplus in the national insurance fund might cover the costs of his proposals in the first year, but would not do so in the long term. What would the Liberal Democrat policy be on that? Where would the money come from for long-term increases?

Mr. Burstow: I am happy to deal with that point. We would reintroduce a new tax rate of 50 per cent. for those earning more than £100,000, which would unlock additional resources. Those people who have done well in our society should pay a little more in tax to allow our pensioners to have a decent income.

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman says that that additional taxation could be used for the pensioners—but would it be used for them, in fact? If it were, it clearly could not be used for other spending plans, such as education or health.

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman needs to get down from the shelf the document that was discussed at our conference in September, if the Department has a copy. That document shows the way in which our various proposals for additional spending on education and pensions would be funded. All too often, the Government conveniently confuse our proposals to increase to 50 per cent. the tax rate for those earning more than £100,000 in order to fund pensions with our proposals for a penny in the pound on income tax to fund education. Those tax increases are not the same; the proposals would achieve different things and would earmark specific funds for specific purposes.

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman is extremely generous in giving way.

How much money would be raised by his 50p-in-the-pound income tax proposal, and how much would be spent on increasing pensions?

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman knows from the figures published in our alternative Budget earlier in the year and from our detailed costings that that tax increase would generate sufficient funds to cover the cost of the age additions and the £5 across-the-board increase. That proposal is based not on costings plucked out of the air but on detailed costings checked by the Library. If the hon. Gentleman would like to see those costings, I would be happy to pass them to him later.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: As we have had a debate on this issue, I will be happy to take one more brief intervention before I conclude my remarks.

Mrs. Lait: I am most grateful. I do not want the hon. Gentleman to feel that he is under a pincer attack. Will he clarify whether the Liberal Democrats plan a one-off increase in the basic state pension, which would continue to be linked to prices, or whether they plan to link the basic state pension to another figure?

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Lady will know that we propose to use the work done by the Family Budget Unit to provide a much more transparent method that would enable pensions to rise in relation to the growth in the economy. It would provide an affordable, low-cost pension package that would relate to the various extra costs that pensioners face and ensure that pensioners were given sufficient income to play an active part in the community and enjoy some leisure time. The figures suggest a pension of £90 for a single person and £135 for a couple. Anyone who reads this speech can do the sums and I am the first to admit that our proposals will not reach that stage in one go. The increases are not viewed as a one-off increase for ever. We need a less blunt mechanism than indexation to prices, which has brought rough justice over the past 12 months and has caused much anguish, anger and fury among pensioners. We know from our surgeries that pensioners viewed 75p as an insult. It was the product of an indexation system related solely to prices and not flexible enough to take account of the overall growth of the economy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: May I issue a gentle reminder? I remind hon. Members that today's subject is pensioner poverty in London, and it would be better if we focused more on that.

Mr. Burstow: Thank you for that reminder, Sir Alan.

I was concluding my remarks by referring to further evidence of pensioner poverty in London. I was arguing that directing extra help to the basic state pension would

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eliminate any danger of a low take-up. Clearly, take-up would be universal. There would be no stigma and administration costs would be low. That is not just my view of administration costs; it is also the view of the Minister of State, Department of Social Security, as expressed in the House earlier this year. He said:

> The figures for 1997-98 show that the administration costs of income support were 6 per cent. of benefit expenditure. The figure for retirement pensions is 0.9 per cent. A means-tested benefit will inevitably cost more because of the calculations involved.—[*Official Report*, 3 April 2000; Vol. 347, c. 685.]

Directing extra cash through the basic state pension will also address another issue identified in the DSS research report, which states:

> There is also often disquiet about the fact that Income Support thresholds can leave those who have worked to provide for themselves with a small occupational or personal pension worse off than those who have made no provision at all. This appears unfair and demotivating.

It certainly is, as many of my thrifty constituents have made clear.

I began by referring to the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement next Wednesday. The Chancellor has an opportunity to demonstrate to pensioners that the Government have not only got the message, but have understood it. One in three of London's pensioners lives in poverty. There are 300,000 pensioners in London—20,000 more since the last general election. Pensioners deserve more than a subsistence pension. Tackling pensioner poverty is the only way to stop the scandal of preventable premature death from cold of 5,400 of London's elders.

10.22 am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I shall remember today with some sadness because my post this morning included a letter from the Benefits Agency about my retirement pension. It tells us all that I am nearly 60 and tells me about the handsome and princely sum of £48.41 to which I shall be entitled as my state pension. I have not read the detail so I do not know how it was calculated. I am one of the lucky ones because I have an occupational pension as well as a pension from Parliament. I certainly do not include myself in the category of pensioners in poverty in London, but it was interesting to receive that letter on the same day as speaking in this debate.

I was a GP many years ago and used to witness pensioner poverty in London on a daily basis. It is still there. We used to call it the burnt legs and bacon sandwich syndrome. Pensioners still live in fuel poverty and single bar electric fires with dangerous wiring are still about. That is what causes the burnt legs syndrome, when the rest of the body is freezing cold; pensioners do not have enough money or energy to make meals other than, perhaps, a bacon sandwich and a cup of tea. I have checked with my hon. Friends, who confirm that that is still a common finding in many parts of London.

I admit that that is not such a common finding in my very affluent constituency, but some elderly people in their 80s and early 90s live in extremely valuable houses in Richmond Park on the minimum income. They have a very poor life style, in a house that drives them crazy because it is crumbling around them while they are unable to do anything about it because they do not want to move out of the neighbourhood or because they are terrified of not having something to leave to the children. If they can hang on as long as possible, they know that they will be reported in the local paper as having left a little bit to their children, which is desperately important to older people. Very old people want to be able to leave their mark when they die; they want to be able to say, "Well, I have done something in life and I can leave something to my children." Although the burnt legs and bacon sandwich syndrome is not prevalent in Richmond, there are other problems.

I came across someone recently who was living on £129 a week, which is extremely difficult to do, but whose house was worth in excess of £400,000. Some people, even though they are extremely poor and on a limited income, try to scrape out of that meagre income a contribution to a club for the elderly so that they can get out and meet other people, which is essential to prevent their becoming isolated. Some may go the adult education college in Richmond upon Thames, which provides many courses and activities for older people, but it is expensive. I want the Government to tackle that problem, because these courses are so important for people living in poor circumstances in the London area, yet they are getting more and more expensive. Taking courses and participating in activities helps people to have a useful and vibrant old age, but the increasing cost of some of the education courses means that many elderly people cannot take advantage of them. Do the Government make that connection?

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) mentioned the problem of income support. We know that 200,000 pensioners living in London receive income support, and it is estimated that a further 62,500 people are eligible for it but do not claim it. In London, 18 per cent. of people over the age of 60 claim income support; the figure for England as a whole is 15 per cent. People need to be encouraged to claim that extra benefit and we must consider the reasons why they do not do so. Many have been brought up to feel that they must be self-sufficient and that they must not depend on charity; they do not want to go to the state for more help than they already have. Some may not claim extra benefit because they do not know about it or because their eyesight is too poor or they are too feeble and frail to fill in the necessary forms.

Several people, especially men, who had failed to claim their winter fuel payment came to my surgery last winter—I do not know why men are so un-sharp about these things. When they went to their local post office to inquire about it, they found that it was no longer available to them. They had to go through a great rigmarole to be able to receive the payment. The Government should tackle that problem. Some people are not getting their winter fuel payment because they do not know about it in time, or because they have been ill and unable to claim it.

There is also the problem of reduced retirement pensions—I would come into that category. If the state pension were my only pension, it would be a great problem for me. I would have to do something pretty swiftly about income support. Of course it is not, but if

it were and I did not know what to do to increase my income, the stuff that I received this morning would not be much help. It is difficult to read. It says:

Have your pension paid straight into your account.

Yet I know people who still do not have bank accounts at the age of 60. That is a problem. They will argue that they do not trust banks with their money and that they like to go to the post office for their weekly allowance. I will not carry on along those lines, as that is not a London problem, but a national problem.

As has already been pointed out, there is an excess of winter deaths in London as a result of pensioner poverty. That is a disgrace. I urge the Government to do something nationwide about not just fuel poverty but the insulation of houses. Our housing stock in London is poor and badly insulated. The emphasis must be on winter warmth and insulation and not just handouts from the Government, which is how old people see it. The Government have done some things; I recently saw Thora Hird, bless her, on television. I am a great supporter of TV adverts. Most people in this country, even the poorer pensioners, have television sets. The Thora Hird campaign is great and I hope that it is successful.

We must ensure that isolated people are aware of what is available and are getting the help that they need. GPs, social workers and health visitors are useful people but they often do not have enough time to address these problems. Post offices are often the centre of the universe for old people. Whether they live in a tiny village in London—we are always told that London is a collection of villages—or out in the country, the weekly trip to the post office to collect their pension is something that old people make the effort to do. They may have to send someone else, but that is their point of contact. More information should therefore be available in post offices.

I have another suggestion. One of the most useful people in London for the elderly is the milkman. He calls at every house and delivers all sorts of goodies. Why can he not also deliver some information to elderly and isolated people? When my elderly mother was alive and living just around the corner from me, the milkman would give me a regular update. If I had not seen her for a couple of days, he would tell me how she was getting on. The milkman knows whether elderly people take their milk in. He knows the level at which they are living and whether they can pay their bills. Let us have a campaign using such people.

We should always remember that elderly people—I include myself in that category—become increasingly hard of hearing and their eyesight fails. As one gets older one realises that the old senses are failing a bit. However much one tries to wear contact lenses and kid oneself that it is just like it used to be, it ain't. Things get more and more difficult to read and extra help is needed and that help must be sensitive. Nothing will answer the problem more than upgrading the basic amount of money that people receive. I should like the Minister to address that problem and to answer one question. I am a great believer in people receiving all benefits. I am in favour of winter fuel payments and free television licences for the over-75s. They do not discriminate between people and make them have to admit that they are poor and are therefore entitled to some help.

Surely the best way of dishing out a better standard of living for pensioners in poverty in London is to give them a rise in their basic pension and to leave their fuel payments and television licence payments intact. Those who are rich and can afford things—I place myself in that category, in a few years' time—will be taxed accordingly. Surely the simplest approach would be to introduce a blanket rise in benefits and to deduct tax. I should like the Minister to respond to that.

The Government seem to be planning to give everyone winter fuel payments, but we are told that only the poorest pensioners will receive extra help with their pensions. I do not understand why the system cannot be simplified. Winter is approaching, and we have already experienced the most fearful conditions for elderly people to cope with this autumn. I urge the Minister to ensure that the Chancellor of the Exchequer takes extremely swift action.

10. 35 am

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I begin by wishing the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) a happy 60th birthday for when it arrives. It must be a defining moment when a letter falls through the letterbox stating how much the basic state pension is. I throw into the pot the thought that perhaps the hon. Lady did not elect to pay the full national insurance stamp but is probably on the married woman's earned income allowance. I am sufficiently young to have been able to make that choice, and I contributed for a full basic state pension. However, that raises an issue that all women pensioners will face as they approach their 60th birthday.

Dr. Tonge: I am glad that the hon. Lady emphasises that point. I should have said that I too made that decision, having other arrangements. However, people in that category do not realise during their working life what is happening to them. They are often poor or single parents or have small children to look after. They may not make a conscious decision but want to make a saving so that they have more money to spend each week, and are then even poorer when they become elderly.

Mrs. Lait: The hon. Lady is correct. Any Government will have to face that issue. I am sure that she, like me, already receives letters from people complaining that they did not know what they were doing or were not given the option. It is 20 years since people were given the option. Memories fade: who knows? However, I fear that, as a result, a category of ladies will not receive what they expect to receive. Many would have expected their husbands to live sufficiently long, but even as a result of better health provision they may not.

I am interested in the comments of, and especially the analysis and research cited by, the hon. Members for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) and for Richmond Park. I find it slightly ironic that all three of us who have spoken so far represent outer-London seats. We would all agree that although pockets of deprivation exist in the boroughs that we represent, we represent areas that contain relatively wealthy pensioners. However, that does not preclude the problems of isolation that have been reinforced by some of the care in the community changes. As families fragment and people become older, care packages in the home do not make up for people

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popping in. I have long been critical of the fact that the care package that provides the district nurse, meals on wheels and the home help does not compensate for normal human contact. I have long felt that a much more sophisticated way of helping elderly people who are isolated in their homes is necessary.

It is worth while paying tribute to the many voluntary organisations involved, which include not only Age Concern and Help the Aged, and I am sorry that hon. Members have not already done so. In practically every borough, significant groups help elderly people and provide the clubs and facilities that so many of them need. Such help goes well beyond the two big established lobbying charities, and those groups do a wonderful job helping the elderly. In fact, they act almost like the milkman because they know whether an elderly person is missing his or her visit to the hairdresser or chiropodist. Such charitable organisations provide basic services and provide them well—but under increasing pressure.

Under the Government, social services budgets have increasingly been cut. Only last night, the authorities in Bromley held, for the first time in many years, a special meeting to discuss bed blocking by elderly people. The problem is not the fault of elderly people, nor was it their fault throughout the summer. It is happening because social services departments do not have sufficient money to provide the correct help for people who leave hospital and whose health deteriorates at home.

I understand that, in the last year, 150,000 nursing home beds throughout the country have been taken out. That is mainly because the Department of Social Security and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have not increased the standard spending assessment effectively so that boroughs can properly fund the beds that are required to help elderly people, first, to recover and, secondly, to live out the remaining years of their life. It costs elderly people roughly a minimum of £500 a week to stay in a nursing home. As for the standard spending assessment and what social services departments are prepared to pay for nursing homes, we are lucky if that hits more than £300 a week. The huge deficit cannot always be taken up by people who require such care.

Health authorities and health trusts are no more flush than social services departments. Whatever the Government's claims about putting extra money into the health service, that money is not going into the intermediate care that is required. Ironically, I expect that over the winter, Bromley and other London boroughs will find that money will be poured into trying to get people out of hospitals to unblock the beds, and that those people will be placed in inappropriate care. The scandal will be dissipated because, instead of a large number of people blocking beds, one or two people will be inappropriately placed—but one or two people do not make news headlines. Twenty to 30 people blocking beds, as occurred throughout the summer in Bromley and in most other health authority areas in London, create a scandal; one or two people who are inappropriately placed do not create the same scandal.

I am deeply cynical about what the Government will do over the winter to ensure that bed blocking is mitigated. We do not want beds to be blocked, but the possible result of their action will be the wrong treatment of elderly people who should receive much better care. I lay the blame at the feet of the Government because they have not provided sufficient funds to social services so that they can meet the demands of elderly people as they reach the last years of their life.

Mr. Bayley: I hope that the hon. Lady recognises that the families of those who are discharged from hospital into long-stay care have the choice of where those people stay and that, if the social services are contributing to the care, they must agree that the accommodation is appropriate to the care needs of those people. Why is she creating the scare that people will be discharged to inappropriate places and why does she think that her party's policy would achieve more appropriate placements when it is not proposing to spend more money on the problem?

Mrs. Lait: There is a problem because so many beds have come out of the sector. As I said, 150,000 nursing home beds have come out this year alone because those homes cannot meet their costs. The banks are foreclosing. People are getting out of that industry. It is ironic that county councils have been forced to sell their homes because their beds did not meet the standards required by social services and the health authority for modern day, residential and nursing home care. That is another reason why beds have come out of the sector.

Mr. Bayley: Surely the hon. Lady is not suggesting that the regulatory regime should be lightened so that inappropriate beds that do not provide adequate care are retained?

Mrs. Lait: That is the furthest thing from my thought. I am suggesting that the Department of Health must look much more closely at the standard spending assessment and how much it is prepared to pay to social services departments for those beds. At present it offers money below the cost. Many people can afford to pay the difference, and do. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, it causes huge family problems because it requires the sale of the family home. There are other pressures, too.

I am grateful to the Minister for giving me the opportunity to explain our policy on the compulsory annuity. It is an issue that comes right into his Department and it needs to be addressed. At present, many people in retirement have had to take out a compulsory annuity. That annuity, for reasons of which he is well aware, has dropped in value in recent years so that people are getting less per year. Indeed, people on long-standing annuities have seen their value eroded.

Our policy of ending that compulsory requirement for an annuity would, in effect, enable people to have two streams of income when they need any form of long-term care. They can either sell the house or the family can inherit what is in the pension fund. That reduces the antagonism between the generations. It allows people who want to retire to take out, ironically, an annuity or an insurance product to cover the costs of their care, thereby freeing up income to use within the family and avoiding any destabilisation.

The Government must address the issue of the compulsory annuity. I represent an outer-London constituency and, believe me, it is a live one among my

constituents. They feel that they are being done down by the achievements of low inflation, which we put in place and which has been continued by the Government—but then there is not worldwide pressure on inflation. Other factors are increasing longevity—as a result of improvements in health care over many years—and, ironically, the lack of provision of gilts. The Government could help themselves out of the hole that they are getting into by taking away the compulsory requirement for an annuity.

Having lectured everyone on the new Conservative party policy on annuities, I will return to the subject before I am brought to order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I have been listening to the hon. Lady with great fascination: she has not yet tempted me to intervene to say that she was out of order.

Mrs. Lait: I would hate ever to stray out of order when you were in the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Interesting issues have been raised in the debate so far; I have tackled those of poverty and isolation. The points made about people having greater access to funding for warmer homes fall into the same category of criticism as those about the Government's funding of social services or local government. They have extended grants for insulation, but I am not aware of any publicity for that purpose; a few years ago, under the Conservative Government, there was a lot of publicity for the easy access to grants for heating schemes and much was done to insulate homes. Although a lot more money is going into the present schemes, I suspect that people have not heard about them, as there is little evidence of take-up by the public.

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Lady makes a fair point about the take-up of home insulation grants. In my constituency, publicity was given to one of the schemes at a seniors forum but, despite great interest in it, few took it up because the gateway to the scheme was through income support. If people were not already claiming income support, they were not entitled to the grant. That is yet another barrier, and a justified criticism of using income support as a mechanism for targeting extra help.

Mrs. Lait: I understand that problem. In previous years, the criterion was not income support but how cold someone's house was, which was a much more efficient and effective way to evaluate the need for insulation.

That brings me to the minimum income guarantee; I, too, have seen the advertisements featuring Thora Hird and have heard much criticism of them. Despite all the ads, and the letters that people have received, I have had to ask the people who attend my surgeries whether they are claiming minimum income guarantee, to which they reply, "What is that?" When I ask them whether they have had a letter about it, they reply, "I don't think so." Somehow or other, people who are entitled to minimum income guarantee slip through the net.

It would be most helpful if the Minister could tell us how many people have applied for the minimum income guarantee, especially in London, how many packs have been sent out, and how many people are now receiving MIG who previously did not. Until we have those figures, we cannot evaluate its success. Despite the Government's much-vaunted emphasis on helping people through MIG, the amount spent on increases is about £290 million, compared with £1,440 million spent on free television licences and the winter heating allowance. That does not indicate that a large number of people are benefiting from MIG. In fact, most people, whatever their income, get the winter heating allowance, and most will, I hope, for their sakes, get their free television licence. That helps everyone; it helps my wealthy constituents, many of whom are paying 40 per cent. tax in retirement, and it gives some money to those people on the basic state pension with, perhaps, some council tax benefit and housing benefit. That is not the best way to help pensioners. It would be infinitely better to go down our route. Many pensioners have told us that they want their own money in their own hands to take their own decisions about how to spend it. It is ironic that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam adopts the Government line to attack us in terms of the increase, but he ignores the fact that people over 75 need more income and will have a greater increase in the basic state pension.

Mr. Burstow: Let me correct the hon. Lady's misrepresentation of the source of my figure of 42p. I relied on the House of Commons Library to analyse the proposals and I understand that the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) also relied on the Library to prepare his proposals in the first instance. I went to the same source to check the figures. Will the hon. Lady also confirm that when her party's proposal is boiled down to the minimum, it amounts to only 17p extra for the over-80s?

Mrs. Lait: I am delighted that everyone uses the House of Commons Library. I do, too, and I assume that the Government compiled their figures from the same source. All power to the Library. Pensioners believe that it is patronising to be told what to spend their money on. They much prefer having their own money in their own pockets to spend however they want.

I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam and asked questions to clarify what he said. He proposes a basic increase in the state pension to £90 and £135 for singles and couples respectively. It is to be paid for by a 10 per cent. increase in taxation on people earning over £100,000. I was not clear about what happens thereafter: is it linked to earnings or to the nebulous concept of the shopping basket? How will it be paid for? If I understand the hon. Gentleman's answer to the Minister's question correctly, the increased tax for higher earners will pay for the single basic hike only. Thereafter, one must assume that further pension increases will come from further rises in general taxation or from national insurance. Otherwise, there would be the one basic pension increase, which would continue to be linked to prices. Will the hon. Gentleman please clarify?

Mr. Burstow: It would require another full speech to do so, so I shall respond to one important point. It is incorrect to characterise the Liberal Democrat proposal

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simply as prescribing a rise to £90 and £135 pensions. We propose an across-the-board increase in the basic state pension of £5 above inflation, plus an extra £5 at age 75 and an extra £10 at 80. Those figures do not equate to the hon. Lady's, which came from the Family Budget Unit's costings for a low but adequate standard of living.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am worried that the Minister is being left out of the debate. We appear to be conducting a debate on the relative merits of Conservative and Liberal Democrat party policy. I have allowed wide discretion on the subject of pensioner poverty in London, but the poor Minister will not want to be left out entirely.

Mrs. Lait: I have no intention of excluding the only non-London Member present today. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry—there are two non-London Members present. I am trying to help the Minister by clarifying Liberal Democrat policy because, as ever, it is about as clear as mud. I am pursuing the point on behalf of my constituents in Bromley, but it is not much clearer. I accept the hon. Gentleman's correction and clarification and am delighted to hear what he is suggesting. However, he did not say whether the proposal would be covered entirely by the increase in the taxation level for some higher-rate income tax payers and where the money for further increases would come from. I should be most interested to hear him deal with that.

Mr. Burstow: The yield from a 50p rate would provide sufficient funds to cover the £3.1 billion cost of the proposals that I enunciated. We propose to establish an independent body to assess and advise on the level of pension required in future. I recommend that it uses in its calculations the FBU's method of assessing pensioner incomes.

Mrs. Lait: I am pleased to have that answer, as it will enable us to work out by how much income tax must be increased to meet the Liberal Democrats' proposals. As soon as people realise the impact on income tax rates or VAT, they may reassess their attitude to those pensions proposals. We have achieved a great deal in this debate, because we are a little closer to understanding the Liberal Democrats' policy.

Dr. Tonge: Will the hon. Lady deal with her own party's policy and explain why an extra 42p a week would help pensioners?

Mrs. Lait: I have explained our policy at least twice, as I am sure that *Hansard* will confirm. People want control over their own money; they do not like being patronised and told how they should spend it. Giving people control is one of our clear commitments, on top of any inflation-linked increase. Who knows what will happen next week when the Chancellor spreads largesse around the country? I can see that you are becoming restless, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I shall return to the issue of pensioners in London. I shall not speak for much longer, because I am sure that all hon. Members want to hear the Minister justify what the Government are doing.

Poorer pensioners, whom the Chancellor has targeted for extra help, are not receiving that help, because the minimum income guarantee is not reaching the right people and the increases constitute one fifth of the money spent on the heating allowance. The Minister said in *Hansard* on 12 June that the amount so far is £2.2 billion, not the £6 billion claimed by the Chancellor. Pensioners are not doing well under this Government: relatively more of them are living in poverty. There are problems with bed blocking and isolation in the home. Social services or local government cannot help people to insulate their homes at the rate that many of us would like. There is, therefore, a strong case for the Government to deal with pensioner poverty in London.

11.4 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): The unusual occurrence of the Chair defending the rights of Ministers in the Chamber is very pleasant, and I am most grateful for that welcome development. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) for securing this important debate. Like the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), I extend my best wishes to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) for her birthday, which I hope that she celebrates well. I am sure she will be celebrating her birthday rather than an imminent retirement.

Every Member of Parliament of our generation owes a special debt of gratitude to today's pensioners—the war generation. The rights that we all enjoy in our democratic system and the right to stand in elections to this place, we owe to those who fought against tyranny and to protect democracy. In London, especially, we remember the war generation who went through the Blitz. After the second world war, those who are now pensioners created the welfare state and rebuilt our country. Many of them feel cheated by the Conservatives. Some did extremely well and retired on much higher incomes than pensioners had in the past, but the gap between better off and poorer pensioners widened remarkably during the 18 years of Conservative Government. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam referred to the widening gap between the better off pensioners and the poorest pensioners. That is something that the Government must address, and we are doing so with our policies.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam disowning at least part of what the Liberal Democrats said in their manifesto, which stated:

> The basic state pension will remain indexed to prices.

The 75p uprating was an indexation of the basic state pension to prices. The Liberal Democrats now recognise that that policy was a mistake. The Labour party manifesto, by contrast, stated:

> The basic state pension will be retained as a foundation of pension provision. It will be increased at least in line with prices.

We were committed not only to price indexation, but to doing better as the country's financial position allowed. That is why we introduced the winter fuel payments, which last year were £100 per household—almost £2 a week on top of the 75p—and other benefits, especially the minimum income guarantee. Tomorrow, 1 November, sees the introduction of free television licences for the over-75s.

I want to say a word or two about future generations of pensioners. The hon. Member for Richmond Park said that it was wrong that pensioners had to rely on the minimum income guarantee for a decent standard of living. In an ideal world, people would not have to apply, through a means test, for an uprating in their living standards. Therefore, we are reforming the pensions regime so that future generations of pensioners will have a second pension on top of their basic state pension, which will raise them to a level above the minimum income guarantee.

Now, however, we need to do something for today's pensioners, who did not have those opportunities under the Conservatives, and who retired on low pensions—perhaps below the basic state pension level, as in the example given by the hon. Member for Richmond Park. She said that she was fortunate enough to have been able to save in an occupational pension scheme; she made an informed decision that that was the best way for her to provide for her retirement. The hon. Lady also made the point that many people, especially women, were unable to make contributions to a second pension because they had household responsibilities. A caring Government who want to help the poorest pensioners—those who have been unable to make the national insurance contributions to guarantee themselves the basic state pension—have to introduce special measures precisely for that reason. That is what we have done through the minimum income guarantee. We seek to improve the situation for tomorrow's pensioners.

Mrs. Lait: I hope that the Minister will not leave the subject of the minimum income guarantee entirely, because I asked some specific questions about the effect of the campaign.

Mr. Bayley: I would not dream of saying so little about what is the foundation of the Government's response to pensioner poverty. I will come back to it, but first I want to say a little about the Government's plans to ensure that fewer pensioners in future generations rely on the minimum income guarantee.

We have said that the basic state pension will remain the foundation of our pensions policy. It will, but the state second pension builds on SERPS, the state earnings-related pensions scheme. As a result, 18 million people will have significantly better second pensions than they would have otherwise. The problem of SERPS is reflected in the name: it is earnings related. Those on the lowest earnings received the lowest pensions. The state second pension will double what is received by people on the lowest earnings. As a result of a state second pension, someone earning £120 a week will be £40 a week better off in retirement. People who in the past have not been able to earn second pension credits, such as carers or disabled people with broken work records, will be able to earn up to £50 a week more through the state second pension.

We are introducing stakeholder pensions that will provide a better rate of return for people on middle incomes—about £10,000 to £20,000—as personal pensions were not attractive to them because of the administration charges.

Mr. Burstow: I have listened to the Minister's explanation of the Government's plans. With the introduction of the state second pension on top of the basic state pension, will he confirm that many pensioners in the latter part of their retirement will still be led back into means-tested benefits, even once maturity has been reached and the full state second pension is paid out?

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman must wait a little longer. Next week, the Government will publish the consultation paper on the pension credit. We want to reward pensioners who save, either in a bank or building society or in a pension scheme. That will reward those who have not so far benefited from the minimum income guarantee. Some people will have made their own provision through paying into an occupational pension scheme, a stakeholder pension or the state second pension, and will still receive benefit from the minimum income guarantee. That is because we will propose in the consultation paper to broaden its range, so that those who have been prudent and saved also receive further support.

Mrs. Lait: That comes to the crux of the interaction between the minimum income guarantee, the pensioners' credit—whatever it is; we are glad to know that details of it will be published next week—and the desire to save for a stakeholder pension. Logical people will consider the minimum income guarantee and the potential pensioners' credit, if they are eligible for it, and not save for a stakeholder pension.

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Lady will see the answer that she wants when we publish our proposals. We have introduced the pension credit precisely to provide protection for the poorest pensioners, which a Labour Government are strongly committed to continuing to do, while ensuring that people have a strong incentive to save.

Our first priority when we came into office was to tackle the needs of the poorest pensioners; we did that by creating the minimum income guarantee. The hon. Member for Richmond Park asked me to respond to her proposal that the best way in which to tackle pensioner poverty was to increase the basic rate of the state pension. That policy ignores the startling increase in inequality between the better off and the poorest pensioners, which has taken place in the past 20 years. The Government must do more for poorer pensioners than for others to address that inequality. That is why we have introduced the minimum income guarantee.

Dr. Tonge: With respect, I do not understand one point. If one increases the basic income for pensioners, single parents or any other group, those who have or acquire another source of income will be taxed heavily at the upper end of the scale. The way to help the poorest is surely to improve the basic income, from whatever source, and then to recoup it on tax. Do Governments not do that because they do not like imposing taxes? Is that what you are telling us?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not telling hon. Members anything, although the Minister may be.

Mr. Bayley: By the end of this Parliament, the Government will be spending about £6.5 billion more on

[Mr. Bayley]

pensions than was being spent when we came to power. If we were to spread that money equally across all pensioners through the basic state pension, it would provide nothing like the increase that we have been able to give the poorest pensioners. They would be much worse off under such a proposal. Unless there were an income tax rate of 100 per cent., which even the Liberal Democrats do not propose, the richest pensioners would get a much larger increase from the state than they would receive otherwise. If we want to do something about inequality, we must target; there is no alternative. If we do not target, we allow greater inequality.

The minimum income guarantee helps 1.6 million pensioners, of whom 200,000 live in London. The national proportion of pensioners receiving the minimum income guarantee is about 10 per cent., whereas in London it is 13 per cent. The take-up rate is higher, despite the fact that average pensioner incomes in London before housing costs are slightly higher than the national average. Therefore, take-up is an issue, but we have made greater progress in London than in other parts of the country.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park made an important point, to which the hon. Member for Beckenham also referred. Pensioner poverty is a real issue across the whole of London. Of course, it is a real issue in the inner cities but, if one looks behind the net curtains in Richmond or Beckenham or the suburbs, one also finds poverty. It may not be so concentrated in those places, but one still finds people in difficult circumstances who need help now—that help comes from the minimum income guarantee.

The Government have recently launched the biggest ever take-up campaign for any benefit. Pensioners can claim by phone on 0800 028 1111 to inquire whether they are entitled to the minimum income guarantee. Through calls to the helpline and the return of the tear-off slip on the letters that we have sent out, about 500,000 pensioners have made inquiries about the guarantee. I am afraid that I cannot do as the hon. Member for Beckenham requests and give a breakdown by region at this stage, but we shall give a full report at the end of the campaign. We are only part of the way through the campaign; not all the letters have been sent out.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam raised the important point about the worrying number of excess deaths of older people during the winter. I wish that he had acknowledged some of the things that the Government have done to address that situation; we have taken and plan to take further action. We have cut VAT on fuel and we introduced the winter fuel allowance at the rate of £20 per household, which was increased last year to £100 and is to be increased this year to £150. Also, we are about to publish our fuel poverty strategy.

Several hon. Members have made the point that we should not only provide cash to enable people to meet fuel bills but do more to insulate homes and make them more energy efficient so that the bills are not as high. The Government agree with that absolutely. About 800,000 homes will have benefited from the new home energy efficiency scheme by 2004, with help of up to £2,000 per household to put in better heating systems and insulation. Sixty per cent. of those receiving help from the home energy efficiency scheme will be pensioners. Over seven years, the affordable warmth programme will make grants to 150,000 pensioners.

Dr. Tonge: Before the Minister goes on, will he explain who would receive those grants for insulation? Will it be only those on the minimum income guarantee?

Mr. Bayley: No, not only those on the minimum income guarantee will benefit. People can access the system through their local authorities.

Dr. Tonge: Is it means-tested?

Mr. Bayley: Yes, there is a means test on the scheme. I can drop the hon. Lady a note to give her further details.

I listened carefully to the Liberal Democrats' proposals to increase the basic state pension by £5 with an additional £5 for the over-75s and a further £10 for the over-80s. It is a generous scheme, which, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam acknowledged, would cost more than £3,000 million. The question that pensioners are entitled to ask, and which has not been answered today, is where that money will come from. The Liberal Democrats seem to suggest that they were mistaken in making a proposal in their manifesto before the last election that was similar to the Government's MIG proposal. By cancelling the whole of MIG—if that is the Liberal Democrats' proposal—they would only save about £2,000 million; they would still be about £1,000 million adrift. Raising the cost of pensions increases through raising the rate of income tax for people on higher earnings, as they propose, could cover the cost for year one but not in subsequent years. They would have to press ever higher rates of income tax to achieve what they intend. They owe it to pensioners and to the working population as a whole to explain where the money would come from.

Restoring the earnings link would cost the country an additional £20 billion by 2020, a 50 per cent. increase in today's pensions spending. Most important of all, that would not address the needs of those pensioners on low and modest incomes, who have saved through pensions schemes or have savings in the bank and who are precisely the people whose needs we shall address through the pension credit.

As we have already announced, from April next year, people with savings of up to £12,000 a year will be able to benefit from the minimum income guarantee. As a result, some 500,000 pensioners will gain by an average of £5 a week. However, we plan to go further still. We recognise that a system of capital rules for the MIG discourages saving, and we plan to abolish capital limits and to consider instead income from savings, because we believe that that would mean a fairer system.

Mr. Burstow: I am interested to hear that incomes will be considered. Will the Minister be considering tariff income, which assumes a 20 per cent. rate of return on people's savings? I should love to find the bank that pays that rate, as would many pensioners.

Mr. Bayley: As the hon. Gentleman knows, tariff income is not and was never intended to be a rate of

interest. However, his point highlights the problem of capital limits, which, unlike us, the Liberal Democrats have not said that they would consider abolishing. We believe that it would be fairer not to provide a disincentive to save, although obviously account must be taken of the interest that people receive on their savings. Pensioner credit will go further. It will reward saving on the part of those who have a modest occupational pension. In addition to the minimum income guarantee, for every pound saved, pensioners on the credit will receive additional help. The Government will publish their consultation document on the credit next week.

The changes and our proposals will be subject to consultation, and any legislative changes will have to be presented to the House. Changes therefore cannot be introduced before 2003. However, the needs of pensioners whose income is just above the minimum income guarantee level must be dealt with now, and the Chancellor will announce transitional measures in the pre-Budget report.

I believe that I have covered the issues raised by hon. Members. When we took office, the Government made it clear that our first priority was to do more to help the poorest pensioners, and we have done so, through the minimum income guarantee. At the time of the previous election, in cash terms the basic state pension was £62.45. The current minimum income guarantee level is £78.45 in cash terms, £16 a week more than when we came to power. The Chancellor has already made it clear that for a single pensioner, the MIG level next year will be £90—a dramatic increase in the standard of living for the poorest pensioners.

As a Government, we have taken measures to help all pensioners. All pensioners receive the winter fuel payment, not a week after the event, following seven days of below-freezing temperatures, but as of right, at the start of the winter. It was introduced at £20, was increased to £100 this year, and, as I said, will increase to £150. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam believes that more should be done for older pensioners. From tomorrow, we are introducing free television licences for the over-75s. That is a measure that we have introduced for older pensioners, targeting help for them through free television licences.

Through the proposal for pension credit, which will be open to consultation next week, we shall do more for those on modest incomes, who have not hitherto benefited from the minimum income guarantee. Our policies are radical, but they are workable and affordable and will ensure that pensioners in London and throughout the country are able to share in the nation's rising prosperity.

Morecambe-Lancaster Bypass

11.29 am

Miss Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale): Once again, I welcome the opportunity to put the case for completion of the road link between the port of Heysham and the M6 motorway. On 11 February 1998, during my previous Adjournment debate on the matter, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson), who is in the Chamber today, told the House why it was essential that that link should be completed at the earliest possible moment.

It is not my intention to reiterate those arguments today, because the need for the road has been established; indeed, it has been incorporated into the strategic plan of the relevant local, county and regional organisations. As long ago as 1995, the panel that conducted the public examination of the Lancashire structural plan concluded that improved links between Morecambe and Heysham were needed and that another river crossing would help improve the movement of traffic in Lancaster. Since then, Lancaster city council, Lancashire county council, the North-West regional development agency, the North-West regional assembly, the local planning inspector, the Confederation of British Industry, the Morecambe and Lancaster chambers of commerce and the overwhelming majority of people who live in the area have recognised the need for the road. I invite the Minister to confirm that the Government, too, recognise that need.

My purpose today is not to give global reasons why a link road should be built, but to put on record the reasons why the bid for that major scheme, submitted by Lancashire county council as part of the Lancashire local transport plan for the years 2001-06, should be supported by the Government. The proposed Heysham-M6 link would be a 9.7 km, single-carriageway, all-purpose road. It would extend from stage 1 of the Lancaster-Morecambe bypass at White Lund, pass through open countryside to the west of Lancaster city centre and join the M6 at junction 33. It would allow traffic travelling between the M6 and the towns of Morecambe and Heysham to bypass Lancaster. It would provide access to new and existing areas of employment in Morecambe and Heysham and to the west of Lancaster and it would improve access to the major port of Heysham and the smaller port of Glasson dock.

Improved access would considerably enhance the prospect of attracting much-needed new business and employment into areas of high unemployment and social exclusion. Lancaster and the surrounding areas suffer a significantly higher rate of unemployment than the average for Lancashire—or for England. As a result, all the existing and proposed employment areas, except for the Bailrigg business park, would be in wards that qualified for European objective 2 status and regional selective assistance; the business park would qualify only for the latter. The Lancaster single regeneration budget also provides special funding for the inner wards of Lancaster—including, as an industrial area improvement scheme, the Lune industrial estate. It also identifies the Marsh estate and the adjoining private housing area as one of its main communities. It would be highly perverse of the Government to recognise that

[Miss Geraldine Smith]

the district urgently needed assistance to regenerate itself but fail to remove the biggest barrier to regeneration—the appalling road links.

The new road would be of particular importance to Heysham port, which is the only port on the north-west coast that is accessible at all states of the tide. There are four daily freight sailings to Belfast, three to Dublin, two to Warrenpoint, two to the Isle of Man and two passenger Seacat sailings to Belfast. It is also the main port that serves the Morecambe bay gas field. Between 1990 and 1998, foreign and domestic traffic increased from 1,485,000 tonnes to more than 3,585,000 tonnes. Ship arrivals have increased from 1,729 to 3,278 and container units have risen from 98,000 to 273,000. Such developments have resulted in a significant increase in heavy goods vehicles using the port, 85 per cent. of which arrive from or proceed to destinations south of Lancaster.

While there is no doubt that Heysham is the fastest growing port on the north-west coast of England, it faces severe competition from other ports such as Liverpool, Holyhead and Stranraer. There is growing evidence that Heysham's further development is being put at risk by its poor road access. Surely it would be a grave mistake to allow a flourishing enterprise to be strangled by its own success. The Government must ensure that that does not happen.

The proposed new road would provide much more than the economic benefits and regeneration opportunities to which I have referred. It would relieve the awful congestion on the approach roads and bridges into Lancaster and reduce dramatically the number of traffic movements within the city. It would bring environmental improvements to many thousands of people whose lives are currently blighted by traffic, noise and air pollution. It would also enable the full implementation of the Lancaster transport strategy, a package of measures aimed at promoting alternative modes of transport in and around Lancaster, and bring about a significant reduction in road accidents and injuries.

If opened in 2005, the Heysham-M6 link would carry 20,500 vehicles a day over the River Lune and more than 16,000 vehicles a day south of Ashton road. It would remove 10,600 vehicles per day from Skerton bridge, 9,700 vehicles per day from Greyhound bridge and 15,300 vehicles per day from Morecambe road. The real significance of the traffic reductions is probably best understood by considering them as a percentage of the existing traffic levels. For example, traffic on the A6 would be reduced by 56 per cent. at Galgate and 57 per cent. at Scotforth. Traffic would be reduced by 27 per cent. on the city centre northbound gyratory road and by 23 per cent. on the southbound road. The A683 Morecambe road would benefit from a 37 per cent. reduction in traffic. The traffic on the Skerton and Greyhound bridges would be reduced by 33 per cent. and 30 per cent. respectively and the traffic on the A683 Caton road would be reduced by 25 per cent.

Such a considerable reduction in traffic levels would allow the further introduction of bus priority measures, such as bus lanes over the Lune bridges, thereby improving timetable reliability, which will significantly increase the attractiveness of bus travel as an alternative to car use. It would also allow the extension of cycling facilities in the centre. Such reduction in traffic would provide a much-improved environment for pedestrians and lower levels of noise and pollution. More than 10,000 properties would be subject to lower noise levels and almost 6,000 would benefit from better air quality. It is estimated that in excess of 30 road accidents a year would be prevented as a result of building the link road.

The estimated cost of the road is £55.6 million, and its net present value is more than £104 million, with a benefits-cost ratio of 3.577. If provided, it would meet all its stated objectives, which are to improve communications between Morecambe and Heysham and the M6 motorway; to release land allocated for industrial regeneration and improve access to the port of Heysham; to relieve traffic congestion in and around Lancaster city centre; and to permit the continued development of alternative travel modes, particularly buses and cycles. All in all, it represents a much-needed, value-for-money solution to the traffic problems that have blighted the Lancaster district for many years.

I shall now refer to the report and recommendations of the inspector who chaired the public inquiry into the Lancaster local plan. Following the recommendation of the panel that conducted the public examination of the Lancashire structural plan—that a bypass to the west of Lancaster may not be the best solution and that a northern bypass should be considered—three routes were identified, one to the north and two to the west of Lancaster. After much argument and debate, both Lancashire county council and Lancaster city council chose the western route, initially as the preferred and subsequently as the sole option. An amendment was accordingly written into the local plan. That route was chosen because it was the only one fully to address the area's problems and to meet its needs. The decision was fully supported by myself as Member of Parliament for Morecambe and Lunesdale and by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre.

The local plan inspector produced a report in June this year that recommended that the pre-inquiry change to the local plan, which had confirmed the proposed route, should not be accepted and that the proposal to set aside the land to build the link road be deleted. The inspector had concluded that a northern bypass would provide similar benefits at a lower cost, and declared that the funding for the proposed scheme during the period of the Lancaster district plan—up to 2006—would not be forthcoming.

The inspector reached his conclusion on the basis of a comparison between the identified northern route and the proposed western bypass. At the time of the inquiry, both those roads were envisaged as illuminated dual carriageways and the estimated costs of building them were £65 million for the northern route and £90 million for the western route. Subsequently, however, significant modifications were made to the western scheme and the estimated cost was reduced by £34.4 million. That was achieved through lowering the road specification to a wide single carriageway and avoiding disturbance to a pipeline carrying ethylene gas.

Despite the reduced specification, the revised scheme retains virtually all the economic benefits and road congestion relief capabilities of the originally envisaged dual carriageway and it certainly outperforms the alternative northern route in virtually every aspect. It is

cheaper and more cost-effective; it provides greater relief from traffic congestion both on approach roads and within the city of Lancaster; and it does not have the adverse environmental impact of the northern route. The environmental factor weighed heavily against the northern route throughout the process.

The reduced specification has other positive benefits because it substantially reduces the impact of the road on wildlife in the Lune estuary and is less likely to induce additional car journeys through spare capacity. Accordingly, the county council and the city council determined not to accept the local plan inspector's recommendations.

The proposed scheme is the only major transport scheme included in the Lancashire county council local transport plan. It has the support of the North-West regional development agency, which believes that it will do much to resolve current problems of congestion, pollution and environmental damage, especially in the centre of Lancaster. It has been included in a draft regional planning guidance as a priority scheme to be completed by 2007. I believe that the foregoing demonstrates that an integrated approach has been adopted at all levels of local and regional government in producing the proposed scheme. Government approval and funding are required for it to become a reality. The Government are due to respond formally by the end of the year. I hope that what I have said today will help clear up any confusion at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions about possible changes to the scheme resulting from the local plan inspector's report.

Can my hon. Friend point to any areas of Government concern about the scheme? In view of the importance of the link road to my constituents and to the Lancaster district overall, will he undertake to visit the area to discuss any concerns in an appropriate forum before the Government give their formal response to the scheme?

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman rises in his place. If an hon. Member wishes to intervene in an Adjournment debate, it is traditional to get the permission of the initiator of the debate and the Minister, which the hon. Gentleman may have done, and to notify the Chair of his interest in speaking. Does he have the permission of his hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith) and the Minister?

Mr. Dawson: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have the permission of my hon. Friend, but I have not had an opportunity to speak to the Minister.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I will use my discretion on this occasion and call the hon. Gentleman, not least because his constituency has been mentioned in the debate.

11.45 am

Mr. Dawson: I am extremely grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for any discourtesy. As you say, the proposal has profound implications for my constituency. Indeed, the majority of the road runs through it. I should simply like to reiterate some of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith) made in her superb speech.

The provision of funding for the western bypass of Lancaster in December 2000 would be the single best thing that the Government could do for Lancaster, and this is a Government who have done a great deal for Lancaster in the past few years. The western bypass is a green measure. Not only would it significantly improve the Lancaster's environment, which suffers grievous traffic congestion and terrible levels of pollutants such as benzene and carbon monoxide, it would relieve rural roads. One of the 10 most heavily used rural roads in the country runs between Cockerham and the M6.

This measure would support the development and improvement of an integrated public transport system for Lancaster by removing congestion, removing the weight of motorised traffic from city centre roads, creating another bridge across the Lune and creating opportunities for the development of park and ride and the further development of bus transport and cycling opportunities on roads that would be freed from traffic. As my hon. Friend has ably demonstrated, it would be a tremendous boon to assisting the regeneration of rundown industrial areas that are currently landlocked and badly need this sort of investment and the access that this road would create.

11.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I should like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith) on securing the debate and setting out so clearly, strongly and in such detail the interests of her constituents and the problems they face. I should also like to congratulate her on the energy, commitment and tenacity that she has shown in pursuing the matter. Indeed, this is the second debate that she has secured on this subject recently.

I am well aware of the problems highlighted by my hon. Friend and of those faced by Lancaster. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) has shown similar commitment to the interests of his constituents and has spoken with typical brevity and force.

Unfortunately, traffic congestion has an adverse effect on many urban areas. I emphasise that I appreciate the need to improve access to the port of Heysham and Morecambe. That is important if the port and tourism in the area are to prosper. As my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale said, single regeneration budget funding is assisting economic and social regeneration. The area qualifies for European objective 2 funding and assisted area status.

Before I deal with Lancaster and Morecambe, it might help if I describe the progress that we have made with our transport policy to deal with some of the concerns outlined by my hon. Friends. Since coming into government, we have made it clear that transport is one of our top priorities. Tackling congestion is a key element of our integrated transport policy. Good transport is essential to a better quality of life, a strong economy and a better environment. Improving public transport is also vital to reducing the social exclusion of

[Mr. Keith Hill]

people without access to a car. Delivering better transport means tackling problems caused by decades of under-investment and a lack of strategic planning, which have left us with crumbling infrastructure, public transport in decline and increased dependence on the car.

We face major challenges. Economic growth continues to bring rising transport demand. In turn, that leads to congestion, especially on key road links between towns. Public transport in many areas is inadequate. A lack of choice in public transport sends people back to their cars, adding to congestion. Our ability to find a way out of all that is hampered by a lack of integrated strategic planning.

The 10-year plan, published in July, is our response. Our goal is to transform the nation's transport system in the next 10 years. The £180 billion programme of public and private spending is designed to tackle the legacy of under-investment and is based on the public and private sectors working together. Almost 75 per cent.—£132 billion—will come from the public purse. The increased spending starts right away. In the next three years, public spending on transport will rise from £5 billion per year to £9 billion per year. For local transport, the plan provides £50 billion in public spending and £9 billion in private investment, which totals £59 billion over 10 years. It identifies national priorities. It will be the job of key partners in the regions to interpret them according to the needs of their areas.

I have focused on transport issues, but they are part of a much wider picture. Regional transport strategies are part of the regional planning guidance, which considers all aspects of development. North-west regional planning guidance will face an examination in public next February. We are keen to see regions adopt an integrated approach, so that provision of transport infrastructure complements the economic, social and environmental priorities embedded in planning guidance.

Crucial to the delivery of many schemes are the first five-year local transport plans, which were submitted to my Department in July. We have made a lot of progress on assessing the plans, leading up to the announcement of funding decisions in December, as my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale anticipated. I am encouraged by the overall standard and commitment shown by all authorities in completing their plans.

We are committed to improvements in local transport. We have provided for £4.5 billion of investment in the next three years. Last year, £755 million was allocated to LTPs—up 21 per cent. on the previous year. That investment is set to rise to £1.3 billion next year and continue rising to £1.7 billion in 2003-04. Those are large sums, but we are ambitious. We have set demanding but achievable targets to ensure that we can measure improvements in our transport infrastructure and public transport services. For example, by 2010 we want to see congestion reduced below current levels on the inter-urban trunk road network and in large urban areas by promoting integrated transport solutions and investing in public transport and the road network. We also want a 50 per cent. increase in passenger rail use, with improving punctuality and reliability, and bus use increased by 10 per cent., also with improving punctuality and reliability; the doubling of rapid transit use—light rail and trams; a one-third increase in the proportion of rural households within about 10 minutes' walk of an hourly bus service or better; and a tripling of the number of cycling trips. We shall monitor our progress in achieving those and other objectives. To provide independent scrutiny, we have asked the Commission for Integrated Transport to report regularly on progress with the plan. It is in everyone's interests that we should succeed. Better public transport and reduced congestion will deliver a better quality of life and contribute to economic prosperity by reducing time lost through congestion and delays.

I now move to the specific issues raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Morecambe and Lunesdale and for Lancaster and Wyre. Although I have not yet had an opportunity to visit the area, my predecessor, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), did so when she officially opened the port of Heysham's £2 million linkspan, a road bridge that allows freight to load on and off the ferries. I understand that she saw some of the work already being done to tackle Lancaster's traffic problems, and she discussed with councillors their proposals for improving access to Morecambe and Heysham. Lancashire has also made a good start in tackling transport problems through the provisional local transport plan and the full local transport plan that was submitted to Ministers on 31 July.

The road that we are debating has some history. Following public examination of the Lancashire structure plan, the independent inspector's report recommended that the Lancaster western bypass should be deleted, as the traffic benefits were unlikely to outweigh the combined effects of the visual impact on the landscape and the potential harm to conservation interests on the Lune estuary site of special scientific interest. The structure plan includes the M6 link, but takes no view on which route should be chosen.

In 1998, Lancashire county council consulted the public on three different routes to complete the road link from the M6 to Heysham. I understand that the consultation showed considerable support for completing the link. The three routes considered were the so-called orange route, a northern bypass of Lancaster; the green route, a western bypass of Lancaster and Galgate; and the blue route, a shorter route to the west of Lancaster that involves the construction of new junctions on the M6 south of Lancaster. For various reasons, I understand that the blue route has been ruled out.

At the Lancaster local plan inquiry, the inspector was not prepared to make a reservation of the green route, mainly because its cost, and the problems that it raised, meant that it could not realistically be brought forward within the plan period. He would have made a reservation for the orange route—

Miss Geraldine Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hill: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I must respond to the points raised and I have little time in which to do so.

The inspector would have made a reservation for the orange route, but the city council would not accept it. That council now proposes to make a reservation for the green route.

The M6-Heysham link scheme also features in the north-west regional planning guidance and regional transport strategy that was submitted to the Secretary of State in the summer. The opening of phase 1 of the Heysham to M6 link in July 1994 removed a significant volume of traffic from the built-up areas of Morecambe and Heysham, including a large number of heavy goods vehicles travelling between the port of Heysham and the M6; completing the link could further improve access and reduce congestion.

Proposals for the road have been submitted as part of Lancashire's local transport plan. It will be carefully considered against our five criteria—economy, safety, environment, accessibility and integration—and against the wider benefits that it might bring to the local transport plan as a whole. Any decision will form part of the local transport plan settlement to be announced in December. My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale will understand that I cannot comment on the assessment process, on individual plans or on the merits of particular schemes within them at this stage.

Miss Smith: On the point about the planning inspector, does my hon. Friend agree that the circumstances have changed? We are now discussing a single carriageway road and the cost has been substantially reduced. That changes the comparison with the northern route.

Mr. Hill: I am aware that the cost of that scheme has been reduced from £95 million, if my memory serves me correctly, to about £55 million. Clearly, changes have been made. However, I should like to assure my hon. Friend that the issues she has raised will be examined closely and taken into account in consideration of the local transport plan.

Far East Prisoners of War

11.59 am

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): It is good to see the Minister in his place. I understand that it has not been too easy to get here from Kirkcaldy in the last day or so.

Prisoners of war are an important issue. This is the third time this year that they have been the subject of an Adjournment debate. That reflects the nature of the issue and the wide support that there is and has been across the House for paying a gratuity to this small band of surviving British heroes, whose heroism and service have not been sufficiently recognised until now. We are not, sadly, talking about very many. We are talking about 7,500 men and perhaps 3,000 widows. Since the case came to Downing street for the Prime Minister's personal attention in a meeting with the Royal British Legion last April, some 250 more of them have died. There is a sense of urgency here, of time running out and, as the Prime Minister himself put it, there is a debt of honour to be paid. I trust that the Minister will reply in a positive vein.

I want to give thanks at this point to some remarkable people. One of them is Arthur Titherington, the chairman of the Japanese Labour Camps Survivors Association, who has single-handedly kept the flame alive on this issue. Another is his deputy chairman Mr. Sid Tavender. I am honoured to have been asked to be the president of that association. I am out of my company in such a band of heroes, but I had to accept. Thanks must also go to the Royal British Legion, which has led the campaign, and to many Members of Parliament, especially the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) who secured an Adjournment debate in June and the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), who leads the all-party group on the issue.

This is not a party political issue and it never has been. It is an issue of national honour and natural justice. The facts are fairly plain. Battalions were raised in 1941at the worst time in the second world war. Many of them were formed into the Eighteenth East Anglian Division and they were preparing for service in Iraq. They were diverted to Singapore and they arrived there just in time for the surrender. They were in fact sacrificed. We sent the men, but we did not send the tanks or the artillery. We did not have the land defences and, most of all, we did not have the air cover that would have enabled them to fight.

Included in the 50,000 men who surrendered at Singapore are the Fourth and Fifth Battalions of my own regiment, the Suffolk Regiment, the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Battalions of the Royal Norfolk Regiment and the First and Second Battalions of the Cambridgeshire Regiment. It is something of an East Anglian role of honour. The young men from the farms, fields and factories of East Anglia were sacrificed. There is not a village that does not bear the scar in some way. Of course, that is extended across the country because others were attached to the battalions from many places. I receive letters every day from the few survivors and their widows asking what has happened and whether their service will be recognised. I trust that this time finally it will be.

Let us consider the costs and casualties. The rate of casualties was higher among those 50,000 service men than among British service men in any other theatre of

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war from 1940 to 1945—much higher, for instance, than in the Normandy landings. I think that it was Laurens van der Post who said that those soldiers showed and needed more courage than any other British soldiers in the whole of the second world war. We do not learn much about our defeats. I served for two years in the Suffolk Regiment without ever being told what happened to those soldiers. For three and a half years they suffered in conditions that are unimaginable to us. It is astonishing that they endured at all.

A quarter of those 50,000 died. Some were executed on beaches. Some were executed in prison camps. Some were machine-gunned at sea when their ships went down. The majority died from starvation, neglect and disease. Those who came home in 1945 were broken in body and, in some sense, in mind. The old men who write to me—the youngest is 78—tell me how their prison camp experiences come back to them in nightmares. Many are unable to leave home. Many are widowers, and in their loneliness the experiences come flooding back. It is touching to read those letters—

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): The hon. Gentleman has referred to prisoners of war. Will he mention the civilian internees who were held and suffered a great deal of hardship, and urge the Government to look favourably on them when considering any compensation?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising a good point. I believe that the civilian internees were excluded from the Royal British Legion's campaign simply because it was necessary to get something quickly to some of the most deserving cases. However, many families, including young children, were held captive at the same time.

The mental scars are with those prisoners of war to this day. I received a letter from the chief psychiatrist of Combat Stress, a mental welfare society for ex-service men with which I am associated. He screened many of the prisoners years later, in the early 1980s, and wrote to me that what struck him most about them was their quiet dignity and their refusal to ask for anything for themselves. That was the kind of people that they were. They came home in 1945 and were told to get on with their lives; they got a medal. In 1952, they received a compensatory payment of £76 from sequestered Japanese assets, which was trivial, even by the monetary values of those times, and insulting.

We do not deal well with our retreats and defeats, but I believe that out of the debacle of Singapore one group of people—those soldiers—emerged with enormous credit. When they write to me, they do not ask for anything except clarification of what is happening in this year-long campaign that seems to be so close to success—but their wives and widows do ask for something. A couple of letters that I have received in the past two days strike me as extremely eloquent. One of them is from a Mrs. Aldridge of Atherstone. She writes:

> These men really suffered cruelty beyond all recognition and are still suffering. Only those who were there and actually went through it and survived it really know the true facts. My husband was one of those unfortunate people and I know he's still re-living it. They really were slaves and I sincerely hope that you will please continue to keep bringing this issue of compensation up as the P.O.Ws have had their hopes built up on several occasions but as yet nothing has happened and these men are getting fewer daily.

Mrs. Sowerby from Christchurch in Dorset writes:

> My husband was in Changi prison camp for 3½ years. It was cruel to learn what all these brave men had gone through. I keep asking myself why and what for. Our lives are coming to a close now. It would be lovely to get some compensation so we can just go out and treat ourselves not to keep watching our coppers.

I get letters like that every day and find them very moving. I hope that when the compensation is announced—and I trust that it will be, because the Prime Minister was positive in his hints on the subject last week—it will be ring-fenced so as not to affect entitlements in other areas and so that the Government do not take with one hand and give back with the other.

It can be argued that the Japanese Government should have provided the necessary restitution, and of course they should have done. There is an extraordinary contrast between the behaviour of the Japanese Government and people and that of the German Government and people. The Germans confronted the realities of their past, whereas the Japanese tended to draw a veil over it, partly because those war crimes were committed in the name of their emperor. I have received an eloquent, bitter and moving letter from Jack Caplan, who burned the Japanese flag when the emperor visited a few years ago. I do not think that it is for us to insist on reconciliation and that those prisoners should forgive and forget; they can never forget and whether they forgive is entirely up to them.

It would have been possible to reopen the discussions that led to the treaty of San Francisco in 1951; that could have been done in 1955, and the Japanese Government could have been required to pay restitution then. So as not to disturb our relations with the Japanese Government at the time, which was building an economy and a democracy, that was not done. Looking back, I think that that was probably a mistake but, as I said at the outset, the issue is not a party political one. However, it is possible for this Government, in the millennium year, to take a decision that would bring huge credit on themselves and for which they would be thanked by those old soldiers and their friends and relatives across the country—

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for initiating the debate. I certainly agree that the compensation should have been paid by the Japanese Government, and it is a discredit to the Japanese authorities that that has not been done. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if, as we fervently hope, compensation is paid by the British Government in the near future—as was suggested by the reply given to me by the Prime Minister last Wednesday—it would be appropriate for that to be done by Remembrance Sunday? Paying the money to that brave and dwindling number by Remembrance Sunday would be a good way of showing that when we remember all those who fought in the last war, we mean it. I hope that the Government will do that.

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his constant interventions in this matter; as I said, it is not a party matter. He is entirely right. We are approaching the season of remembrance and it is right that we

remember the living as well as the dead. I am hopeful that the decision will be taken and will be announced by the pre-Budget statement on 8 November; that date, before Remembrance Sunday, would seem an appropriate time for it.

I sometimes desert my parliamentary duties to speak to military audiences. I also speak to students—the kids—who are aware that the peace and freedom in which they live was earned by the sacrifices of another generation—that of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. They are receptive to that message. As parliamentarians, we have a duty to make clear our debt of honour and our determination to pay it. We should support the Government in the decision that we believe they are about to take.

I hope and trust that this is the last time that a debate of this kind will be necessary. I trust that the gratuity will be announced before remembrance Sunday, to ease the loneliness and difficulties of old age—all those men are in the evening of their lives—and show that their heroism is recognised. It is a matter of recognition. The sacrifice has never been recognised, and it is as if the nation has drawn a curtain over it or been gripped by a sense of collective amnesia. Now is the time to expect and hope that that debt of honour will be paid to a band of British heroes whom we all salute and to whom we owe so much.

12.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) on securing this debate on what is clearly an important issue. All hon. Members have a considerable interest in the subject, and the debate is a demonstration of the hon. Gentleman's support and concern for those held as prisoners of war in the far east during the second world war.

The hon. Gentleman has pursued the cause in the House on several occasions, through debates and questions. Other hon. Members have similarly championed the cause of those ex-service men, on their individual account and on behalf of constituents, as have Members involved in all-party groups on this and related matters. I should also mention the efforts of the Royal British Legion, which has worked hard to support the claims of former prisoners of war in the far east.

I must apologise; this is the third time in the Session that we have debated the issue, but the Government have still not come to a decision for me to announce. There will therefore be a considerable element of déjà vu in what I have to say. Hon. Members will recall that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I met senior representatives of the Royal British Legion earlier in the year to hear at first hand their views on the matter, which we undertook to consider carefully.

I should remind hon. Members that the issue of further compensation for those held as prisoners of war in the far east during the second world war involves several Departments. Those Departments have been considering the question of an ex gratia payment, which the hon. Member for Tatton, other hon. Members and the Royal British Legion are seeking.

I should recap on the facts, although we heard them in similar debates earlier in the year. The Japanese captured a little more than 50,000 British service men. Most of them were taken prisoner in the initial phases of the second world war in the far east in late 1941 and early 1942, when Japan attacked and captured first Hong Kong, then Malaya and Singapore as well as the Dutch East Indies and Burma. Our fellow Commonwealth forces also suffered the loss of men taken prisoner. The Australians lost more than 18,000 in Malaya and Singapore, and the Canadians more than 1,600 in Hong Kong.

Under international conventions, the treatment of prisoners of war was governed at the time by the 1929 Geneva convention. Although Japan had signed the treaty, it had not ratified it. Japan stated that it would in general recognise the provisions of the convention, but we all know the regrettable historical fact that it did not. Those held as prisoners of war were detained in camps throughout the far east. Conditions and the level of supplies in the camps were at best harsh and poor, although the British Government made considerable efforts in conjunction with the protecting power and the Red Cross to provide relief supplies.

As a safeguard to the prisoners of war, the Japanese should have permitted inspection visits by the protecting power and the Red Cross, but they were refused in many areas. Even where visits were permitted, with considerable obstructions, little could be achieved. That measure produced improvements in the conditions and treatment of prisoners of war in Europe but achieved little for those held in the far east.

As we know, prisoners of war were obliged to work for their captors under the Geneva convention. Unfortunately for the prisoners of war in the far east, especially those involved in the construction of the Burma-Thailand railway, the work was improperly arduous. That, coupled with poor and unsuitable rations, the generally poor conditions, and the climate to which few of the men were accustomed, made them much more susceptible to disease. The indifference of the captors to the men's plight and the often brutal ill treatment combined to take their toll on the prisoners' health, so much so that 25 per cent. of them did not survive captivity. That figure must be compared with that from the German and Italian camps of 5 per cent., and the figure of 8 per cent. for those held as prisoners of war in the later Korean war.

Although the Government were unable to achieve any real improvement of conditions in camps in the far east during the war, steps were taken to demonstrate that the ill treatment of service men was unacceptable, by means of the war crimes trials at the end of the war. Through the Tokyo trials and others in Singapore and elsewhere, some of those held responsible for the ill treatment of our detained service men were brought to justice for their crimes.

It must also be remembered that, uniquely among British prisoners of war, those held in the far east received some compensation for their ill treatment as a result of the 1951 peace treaty with Japan. In addition, further funds, released by Japan to the Government under that treaty, were distributed to POWs and British civilian internees. We accept that many consider that the amount made available by those means, which is the equivalent of about £1,200 in today's money, was too small. None the less, some compensation was paid by the country that had inflicted that suffering on its prisoners. Furthermore, the payment established the

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principle that the captor is responsible for the proper treatment of detainees—which, it must be remembered, was then the firmly stated primary goal of the representatives of former far eastern prisoners of war.

Hon. Members will recall that the possibility of reopening the peace treaty to seek higher compensation from Japan has been raised many times, but we have accepted legal advice that the treaty has closed the matter of gaining further compensation from Japan. We are aware of the argument advanced recently that the Government consciously let down far eastern prisoners of war in 1955 by not reopening the treaty and gaining more money for them. However, we have explained many times that contemporary records show that it is extremely difficult to ascertain what, if any, additional benefits this country would have been entitled to and what their worth would have been. In addition, there is no basis for reopening the treaty to gain further compensation, as Japan has signed no agreement subsequently conferring on the prisoners of war of other countries greater benefits than those already awarded under the treaty. Thus, we cannot accept the view that the actions of the then Government form the basis for taking action now.

Hon. Members will be aware that the current campaign, which is being co-ordinated by the Royal British Legion and is eloquently supported by many hon. Members, suggests that, as it is generally accepted that the avenue of further compensation is closed, further compensation should be paid not by Japan but by the Government with an ex gratia payment. It has been explained to the House on several occasions that that claim would require a major shift from the policy of successive Administrations.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): My hon. Friend has already acknowledged that the compensation given to those men was woefully inadequate. I pass on a message from Major Philip Malens, the chairman of the Royal British Legion in Birmingham, who says that the matter is urgent because three of those men are dying every day.

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution; that fact is recognised.

The hardships and needs of all those who become ill or disabled as a result of their military service, including any periods of captivity, are addressed primarily by the provision of war pensions by the Department of Social Security. From the presentations made by some hon. Members and from the case made by the Royal British Legion, it is clear that they believe that the payment of some £10,000 by the Canadian Government to their former far eastern prisoners of war or their surviving widows, and the similar award made this summer by the Isle of Man Tynwald to their very small number of former far eastern prisoners of war, is a vindication of the claim being made for British far eastern prisoners of war. However, we have said before that although we have noted those decisions, it is a matter for each of those Governments to decide. Different countries have different ways of responding to the needs of their populations—including those of ex-service men.

Although I believe that detailed objective decisions about the degree of suffering that occurred many years ago are impossible, I assure hon. Members that the case put forward in the support of the claim for an ex gratia payment has been subjected to the most careful and sympathetic consideration during the past few months. The hon. Member for Tatton will, of course, be aware of the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to a question by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), who I am pleased to see is present. The Prime Minister said that he had a great deal of sympathy for the campaign mounted by the Royal British Legion for additional compensation for prisoners of war held in the far east, but he asked for patience to be exercised for a little longer for the final decision to be announced.

Mr. Bell: I am aware that the Minister is coming to a conclusion, but will he give us notice of when we may receive an answer?

Dr. Moonie: The Prime Minister said that we would have to wait a little longer for the decision to be announced. Work is currently in hand that will lead to an announcement being made soon, especially given that a statement on the Government's intentions regarding spending is due in the next week and a half. I hope that hon. Members will accept that I cannot add to what the Prime Minister has said on the matter. They will have to wait a few more days for a conclusion to be reached.

Mr. Winnick: I appreciate that the Minister is giving what could be described as a holding answer in view of what the Prime Minister said last week in the Chamber. I plead with him—as I have done on previous occasions—that, if there is to be a settlement, as we all strongly and fervently hope, it will be made at least before Remembrance Sunday. That day is an important time in the history of our country, when we remember the dead and those who survived wars. I beg my hon. Friend to use whatever influence he has as a Minister to see to it that the payment is made, or at least announced, before 12 November.

Dr. Moonie: I am well aware of the symbolic significance of that date and, although I cannot give my hon. Friend a cast-iron guarantee today, I certainly expect some sign of the Government's thinking on the matter to be available before then.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I know that the Minister was unable to be present at Defence questions yesterday when I raised the possibility of compensation being means-related or in the form of an ex gratia payment. I referred also to payments being made to the widows of those who have died while awaiting compensation. Does the hon. Gentleman know whether the Prime Minister is taking such factors into account?

Dr. Moonie: Such factors are being taken into account. An ex gratia payment is made generally on a per capita basis. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, however, there are complications with rules regarding such capital, and we shall bear them carefully in mind when considering what action to take. I cannot say

anything more of any use on the subject. I am sure that hon. Members present will be waiting to see what happens in a few days' time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I hope that I may be excused for saying from the Chair how much I have been moved by much of what has been said in the debate, and by the fact that it has been said across all political parties. I congratulate the Minister on the sensitive way in which he has dealt with the matter.

John Redgrave

12.28 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I am pleased to introduce the debate, which relates primarily to my constituent, Detective Inspector John Redgrave, whose home was raided on 3 February 1997. He was suspended from office on the following day. He was acquitted at Bow Street magistrates court by a stipendiary magistrate on 17 May 1999. The case related to charges pertaining to perverting the course of justice and the Official Secrets Act 1989. I stress that such charges were dismissed by the stipendiary magistrate and that no other charges are outstanding against Mr. Redgrave.

However, the day after the acquittal the Complaints Investigation Bureau of Scotland Yard initiated an almost unprecedented procedure of making an application to the High Court for a voluntary bill of indictment, which, had it been successful, would have reversed the stipendiary magistrate's decision to throw out the charges. My constituent was not told of that application to the High Court. Notwithstanding that, the High Court judge rejected the CIB's application and reaffirmed the stipendiary's decision.

My constituent has given 30 of his 46 years to the Metropolitan police. He has received numerous commendations for his diligent policing. He was referred to as having given outstanding devotion to duty during the complex operation that netted Kenneth Noye, John Lloyd and other major gangsters from south-east London following the gold bullion investigation in the mid-1980s, and has received countless other commendations.

We now know, as it was disclosed to my constituent's lawyers on 17 June 1997, that the CIB was aware of a £50,000 contract taken out by criminals to kill or discredit my constituent soon after a successful operation against an ecstasy factory in north London. Notwithstanding the fact that this was known to the CIB, as far as we are aware there has been no police investigation into that contract and the motives involved. Such an investigation would probably throw some light on how my constituent has been framed.

Obviously my constituent would have been heading for further promotion, but on 3 February 1997 his world crashed. The CIB broke into his house in the most traumatic circumstances, causing maximum embarrassment to his children and family. He has not recovered. I hope that the Minister can disclose—if he cannot do so today, I shall table a written parliamentary question—the information that was served on the justice of the peace to justify the grant of the search warrant. As far as I am aware, there was none, bearing in mind that we now know that the substantive allegation made by a police informant had been withdrawn by that stage, although that was not disclosed to my constituent for some years.

I could produce much evidence of the tremendous trauma that my constituent has suffered. Last year, he told the Police Complaints Authority:

> This had caused the complete destruction of every aspect of my personal and professional life, friends, financial security, family, marriage, career, reputation. The building blocks of life have all gone, with no hope of recovery. The safeguards built into the judicial process to protect all members of our society have been disregarded for reasons of self interest and political expediency.

[Mr. Andrew Mackinlay]

In December last year my constituent was cleared, after more than six years of CIB investigation, yet he remains suspended and is still fighting to clear his name. I join him in doing so. I have referred to the depression that he endured. Also suspended was his subordinate Michael Charman, a detective constable. They have had to endure the suspension together. On 17 July 1998, to try to cheer up my constituent, who was suffering considerable psychiatric problems, Michael Charman and his girlfriend invited him to their house in Pitsea for dinner. We now know, because it has been documented, that their house had been bugged by the Complaints Investigation Bureau.

During the dinner, Charman's girlfriend explained the extraordinary circumstances in which she, a relatively lowly executive officer of the Crown Prosecution Service, had been handed a confidential package relating to an allegedly corrupt police officer who is relevant to my constituent's plight. The circumstances were extraordinary because she was required to attend a case conference that she would not usually have expected to attend, and because she was handed that extraordinary package, which we now know was electronically bugged, by Detective Chief Superintendent John Coles, a senior officer of the CIB.

During the dinner conversation it was mentioned that that day's news had referred to the cross-examination that had taken place during the Macpherson inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. Counsel for the Lawrences, Michael Mansfield, had cross-examined the controversial senior police officer, Ray Adams, about senior Metropolitan police officer relationships with the Norris family or clan.

My constituent resolved that he should consider revealing some of the information that he had to the Lawrence inquiry and Mike Mansfield. He suggested that an incestuous relationship existed between Metropolitan police officers and the wider Norris family and community, and referred to the supposed investigation in the early 1990s into the murder of a David Norris, who I understand was the cousin of the Clifford and David Norris who were the subject of Michael Mansfield's cross-examination. That David Norris was murdered in the early 1990s. He was a paid police informant.

The circumstances of that investigation were wholly unsatisfactory. The CIB demonstrably knew of my constituent's concern about the incestuous relationship, because of the bugging. It was also mentioned in subsequent correspondence and documents. Despite the fact that it was germane to the Lawrence inquiry and subsequent inquiries, the investigators and the Metropolitan police have never asked my constituent to amplify on his information.

The CIB is riddled with people who want to stop further light being shed on those relationships. However, I understand that journalists from *The Guardian* are on the brink of revealing more about them, and I look forward to that. I hope that, like me, my hon. Friend the Minister and the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police will study what is written.

My purpose in securing this debate is to seek an end to the agony and unfairness of the inordinate suspension of my constituent. I asked my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary about the cost to the public of suspensions of Metropolitan police officers, but he was unable to give the total sum. It is a side issue, but it is wholly unsatisfactory and must be addressed.

There has been widespread misfeasance at the highest level in the Metropolitan police. I again demand a full judicial inquiry into Operation Nightshade, with which my constituent was involved, and the consequent malevolence and corrupt practice of those who served and serve in the CIB against my constituent and other officers.

I want to halt Commander Hayman's dilatory and partial handling of my constituent's serious complaints of wrongdoing by John Coles and others in the CIB. I want responsibility for the investigation to be removed from the Police Complaints Authority. Commander Hayman should have investigated my constituent's complaints, but is now demonstrably disqualified from doing so. Incidentally, he invited me to have a security briefing, but I declined, because I thought that such an approach was wholly improper. I want someone else appointed who will conduct an investigation impartially and vigorously. It should be completed before any disciplinary hearing against my constituent takes place, although any such hearing would be a charade, because he has nothing to answer.

The inquiry that I seek would complement the KPMG study commissioned by the Home Secretary following recommendation 58 of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry report, which states:

> Investigation of police officers by their own or another Police service is widely regarded as unjust, and does not inspire public confidence.

I believe that the KPMG study should be undertaken at the same time as the public inquiry. The Government should then give their view about how to proceed on police corruption investigations.

The CIB has recently fallen foul of several High Court judges as a result of its techniques. Judge Harvey Crush of Maidstone Crown court gave a damning 42-page judgment on the botched Operation Nectarine by the CIB and Kent police. I understand that the Director of Public Prosecutions is conducting an internal inquiry in light of that judgment. I hope that the Minister will say that the DPP's report will be published.

As I said, my constituent, Redgrave, was suspended on the basis of an allegation by a police informant that he had corruptly bunged my constituent stolen money from Operation Nightshade. My constituent was not advised that the allegation, made in June 1994, had been withdrawn. In fact, the informant withdrew it on 27 January 1997. On 11 February 1998, my constituent's lawyers wrote to the Police Complaints Authority. On 19 February, John Cartwright—the vice-chairman of the PCA—wrote back to the lawyers saying that he was not aware of the allegation's withdrawal. He is supposed to be overseeing my constituent's complaints. It was not until the committal hearings on 17 May 1999 that the withdrawal on 27 January 1997 became clear from the bundle of papers disclosed to the defence.

We now know that there are no grounds for the continued suspension of my constituent or for the bugging probe at Michael Charman's dinner. I believe that the warrants obtained for access during the raids were probably unlawful. Police procedures were

certainly not followed. I hope that the Minister will investigate further. Despite all that, Detective Chief Superintendent John Coles, unprofessionally and with maximum spite and deceit, continues to traduce my constituent by making baseless accusations that he shared a £50,000 bung with another officer. When will it stop?

There is a serious political dimension to Operation Nightshade—an anglo-American police sting across three continents, costing millions of pounds. It started in June 1993 and a central figure was a registered police informant to whom I have already referred. He was handled by Detective Constable Michael Charman and my constituent was the senior investigating officer.

Operation Nightshade incorporated three elements—a planned cocaine shipment from Venezuela to the UK; a money laundering scam; and, most importantly, an illegal arms deal using Sierra Leone as a trans-shipment point. The British side included Customs and Excise; the south-east regional crime squad; SO10, the undercover outfit in Scotland Yard; and SO13, the anti-terrorism branch. The British worked closely with the Houston branch of United States Customs, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Branch of the US Treasury Department. All were in the loop.

The informant had been approached in 1993 by a Texan-based gang with an offer to sell arms. The Americans were in the car business and boasted high political connections in Texas, where they lived in opulent homes. Roger Crooks was one of the group and it transpires from my questions to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that he met Peter Penfold, our high commissioner in Sierra Leone in recent times. It was Crooks who supplied the helicopter in the Sandline affair and he also runs the Mama Yoko hotel, the headquarters of the United Nations in Freetown.

The informant was asked whether he could find a buyer for a large quantity of arms worth millions of dollars. The weapons on offer included M16 assault rifles, grenade and rocket launchers, plastic explosives, mines and ammunition. Redgrave was notified and obtained further authorisation from several senior Scotland Yard commanders and their US counterparts to mount a well planned sting operation. The informant then helped to introduce the Texans to a British undercover officer from SO10, posing as a buyer for Northern Ireland Protestant terrorists. The weapons were to be stolen in part from an army base in the United States and shipped to Britain via Sierra Leone. Officers were particularly interested in finding out how Barratt sniper rifles were getting into Northern Ireland—at the cost of many British soldiers' lives.

The sting operation was going well and undercover officers were gathering evidence against the American gang. After successfully bugging meetings in London and Houston, Redgrave's team and US customs were poised to make arrests. Then something strange happened during the arms negotiations, which ultimately scuppered the operation. The informant was charged with theft of £400,000, which had been deposited in his account by the Texan gang as part of the laundering scam.

To keep Operation Nightshade on track, a financial investigator was appointed by the Metropolitan police to examine the informant's business accounts. Meanwhile my constituent redoubled his and his colleagues' efforts to complete the sting and make the arrest. By autumn 1994, the American gang had backed off. Operation Nightshade, which cost millions of pounds, faded with no arrests on either side of the Atlantic. I would really like to know exactly how much it cost.

The informant disappeared and the theft charges against him were mysteriously dropped. Three years later, in February 1997, as anti-corruption officers raided my constituent's home, it became clear that he and Charman had not escaped the shadow of Operation Nightshade. Subsequently, the CIB told Redgrave and Charman that the informant had been re-arrested for the alleged theft of money during Operation Nightshade. The anti-corruption squad also accused both detectives of turning a blind eye to the theft in return for £50,000. My constituents were not told that that allegation was subsequently withdrawn, which is disgraceful.

The CIB further claimed that in order to disguise the corrupt payment, Redgrave had duped his senior commanders and simply invented the arms deal. That is clearly untrue, as I have ascertained through parliamentary questions and other parliamentary activities. The protection or non-prosecution of people whom Redgrave and Charman tried to investigate through Operation Nightshade is important to understanding what happened to those two officers. That is especially the case when examining the targets connected with the plan to sell arms to two Met undercover officers posing as buyers for Northern Ireland terrorists. I greatly regret that the SO10 officers were not brought before the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, but Members are well aware of our uphill struggle for transparency in that matter.

Confidential Met and United States police documents on the progress of their joint operation against the United States-based gang clearly showed that all the law enforcement officers involved believed that they were dealing with real gangsters offering an arms deal in return for millions of pounds.

In Redgrave's report to his superior on 26 May 1994, he said that the current position was that Crooks had placed an order for arms, faxed exportation documents and received the undercover officers' dummy end-user certificate. The report stated that the targets had also seen proof of purchase funds and Crooks had said on tape that the shipment was ready in a container for export within 30 days. Redgrave noted that the next stage would be to return to Houston to arrest the principals. In a memo from United States Customs dated 9 May 1994, special agent Leon Guinn said that the targets in Houston had repeatedly made incriminating statements over the arms deal in numerous telecommunications and in three meetings with undercover officers in London. Guinn continued:

> Investigation by the SAC—
>
> special customs—
>
> in Houston has determined that the targets have made specific inquiries with US arms dealers... further, the co-conspirators have been recorded alluding to the undercover officers that some of the material requested by them will be taken from US military installations.

Guinn ended by saying that the Government attorney handling the case had expressed

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a desire to pursue prosecution of suspects

and believed conviction to be "very likely".

In another south-east regional crime squad police report, Crooks is described as

the head of the organisation, a high-profile fraudsman, diamond smuggler and arms dealer known to the American authorities and fully researched by the US Customs.

In a summary of meetings between one undercover officer and Crooks at the Britannia hotel in London on 20 December 1993, the undercover officer said:

Roger again said he had no problem in selling weapons to our organisation but he could only get it out of the United States to, say, Nigeria or Sierra Leone. However, he could put us in contact with the right people who would facilitate its onward shipment to the United Kingdom...Roger again said that we would not have a problem getting it from Sierra Leone as he had all the right contacts, in fact he even had a diplomatic passport for that country—

and indeed he has. There are sensitive diplomatic reasons why that aspect of Operation Nightshade has been fudged, which I may make available to the House on another occasion. Crooks and his outfit had high-level contacts in the United States and I believe that political leverage was used. The Operation Nightshade papers show that both the United States and British officers wanted to arrest Crooks and his gang by the middle of 1994 and that opportunity was botched. It is not clear whether MI5 was involved. It is of course unanswerable and unaccountable to Parliament.

Crooks later claimed that throughout the arms deal he was acting as an informant. Crooks appeared later in history at the heart of the United States navy's plan to rescue American and British citizens stranded in Sierra Leone, and he is still involved in the Mama Yoko hotel.

My constituent has been cleared of corruption, but he remains suspended. He believes that his plight is connected to the targeting of Roger Crooks and British policy, official and deniable, on Sierra Leone. He hoped that a judicial inquiry would uncover whether he and others were the victims of a plot by the intelligence services to undermine Operation Nightshade and to protect its targets.

I remind the House that I received some interesting answers from Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers and from the Ministry of Defence. Despite extensive evidence of arms deals involving Crooks in Sierra Leone, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), said:

The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that no such details were revealed as a result of Operation Nightshade.—[*Official Report*, 16 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 268W.]

In other words, no details were revealed of arms deals via west Africa. However, in answer to another question, the Minister conceded that Crooks was interviewed by the anti-terrorist branch in London on 24 June 1993

about matters that involved the supply of firearms.—[*Official Report*, 3 April 2000; Vol. 347, c. 379W.]

Answers from the Foreign Office were equally revealing. I was told that Crooks had been known

to various members of the High Commission for some time.—[*Official Report*, 16 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 287W.]

He had provided assistance in the evacuation of the United States hotel in Freetown in May 1997. The Foreign Office also confirmed that Crooks had had contact with unnamed Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence personnel during the past few years—but not about arms or military matters. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office confirmed that Crooks was expelled from Sierra Leone; but he has now been reinstated. The website of the Sierra Leone news agency said that he had been expelled for trying to arrange the trafficking of arms between Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone. As we know, he also had discussions with Peter Penfold, our controversial high commissioner in Sierra Leone, who was aware of the Sandline plan to arm a counter-coup to restore Kabbah to power.

Only recently, the CIB wrote to inform Mr. Redgrave's lawyers that a disciplinary hearing had been set for February 2001, but that has been aborted following a complaint about a breach of procedure for setting the date. The CIB apologised and cancelled the hearing, and no further date has been set. Indeed, I believe that no hearing should be held. The disciplinary charges are a nonsense, and it is time for a line to be drawn. I believe that the police have a duty to pursue the investigation of my constituent's complaints independently, but that Mr. Hayman is disqualified from conducting it. In my view, he is partial. He refuses to take the counter-complaint seriously, and I remind the House that it includes a reference to the Lawrence inquiry and allegations of corruption about which my constituent has never been interviewed.

I remind the House of the recent employment tribunal ruling in the case of sacked Asian officer Gurpal Virdi. It is clear that that disciplinary hearing was a sham, a kangaroo court working to a predetermined conclusion. The Metropolitan police have agreed to refer that case to the Metropolitan Police Authority. Will they do the same for my constituent? Mr. Deputy Speaker, I apologise for having detained the House, but I think that you will realise that, prima facie, the case stinks.

12.51 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on securing this debate. I emphasise that it is entirely legitimate for my hon. Friend to raise the interests of his constituent but, for reasons that he will understand, I can say little that is specific to the John Redgrave case. However, I shall talk about the questions of discipline and corruption that arise in such cases, and about the role the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Metropolitan police. I shall not respond in detail, but I shall consider carefully what my hon. Friend has said.

At the start of an investigation into alleged corruption, Detective Inspector John Redgrave was suspended from duty on 6 February 1997 and Detective Constable Michael Charman was suspended from duty on 4 February 1997. They immediately reported sick. No criminal charges were brought. In 1998, a second investigation was mounted which led to arrests and charges. The case was dismissed in the magistrates court on the ground of insufficient evidence. However, both officers were then charged with a disciplinary offence under the 1985 police disciplinary regulations.

A police discipline board was to have considered those charges in February 2001, but, because counsel for Mr. Redgrave and Mr. Charman will not be available on that date, the hearing is likely to be put back until April next year. In the event that the charge is proved, the officers will have a right of appeal to the Commissioner and, subject to the Commissioner's decision, to the Home Secretary. My hon. Friend will appreciate that, because the Home Secretary is the final appellate authority for disciplinary matters under the 1985 police discipline regulations, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further on Mr. Redgrave's case today. I shall, of course, respond to further written parliamentary questions, to assist my hon. Friend in dealing with the matter.

I wish to make a preliminary point. I share my hon. Friend's concern about the immense time that it has taken to resolve this and other similar cases. Unfortunately, this is not the only case in which disciplinary matters have gone on for so long. Delays may happen at various stages of the process, sometimes for understandable reasons, which result in it taking a long time to resolve matters satisfactorily. That is why we wish to change the complaints system. A KPMG report and a Liberty report have been completed, and we are now consulting on a series of changes that we hope will make things more transparent and enable cases to be dealt with much more quickly. We are moving rapidly in that direction, and I hope that the House will be able to consider changes to the process when the consultation is complete.

It was for the same reason that we introduced new police discipline procedures, which came into effect on 1 April 1999 after having been in the process of revision for some years. Their main purpose was to establish formal procedures for dealing with unsatisfactory performance by police officers with the availability of a requirement to resign when an officer's efficiency cannot be brought up to standard.

The new discipline procedures have some new features. First, a fast-track procedure has been established to deal swiftly with officers against whom there is very strong evidence of serious misconduct of a criminal nature and against whom it is in the public interest to act swiftly in advance of criminal proceedings. There are full rights of appeal in that process. Secondly, disciplinary hearings are conducted by an assistant chief constable with two superintendents or, if the accused is a superintendent, two more assistant chief constables. Thirdly, the civil as opposed to the criminal standard of proof now applies.

Fourthly, greater powers now exist to hold a hearing in the absence of an accused officer. The hearing can now proceed in his or her absence. Fifthly, a two-stage appeal system has been established. A review by the chief constable is available to all officers, after which there is an appeal to a police appeals tribunal, set up by the relevant police authority, for those officers punished with dismissal, requirement to resign or reduction in rank. There is no involvement by the Home Secretary, who was the former appellate authority. I hope that the proposals concerning complaints that we are currently considering and the new police disciplinary procedures that I have described and which came into effect on 1 April 1999 will help to deal with processing problems. I know that my hon. Friend will welcome several of the changes that we have made.

In general, I should like to think that hard-core corruption is still relatively rare, but that must not make us complacent. By its nature, it is difficult to detect and evidence can be very hard to gather. We must do everything possible to guard against it in the first place. However, when it does occur, corruption creeps almost imperceptibly through an organisation. It can take many forms, which is why it is necessary to deal with it quickly and firmly and why the changes that my hon. Friend advocates in general are ones to which the Government are sympathetic.

The majority of police officers are honest, dedicated and hard working and they deserve public trust and respect for the difficult and dangerous tasks that are demanded of them. We have the job, however, of dealing with the small minority of officers whose behaviour taints the reputation of the police service as a whole. Some areas of policing are more prone to corruption than others. For example, vice, drugs, licensing and other matters where the police exercise regulatory powers associated with extraordinarily large sums of money and high levels of financial temptation are particular areas of concern. It remains fundamentally the case that all officers have a choice to decide how to conduct themselves in such circumstances, and I am pleased that the overall majority of officers faced with that choice behave in the best traditions of the force and the British justice system.

Two reports published in June 1999 by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and the Home Office were regarded as important contributions to the continuing debate on integrity and corruption. They have given us a better understanding of how to prevent and detect corruption. The Association of Chief Police Officers has been particularly active in that area. In 1998, it established a presidential task force to tackle corruption. It issued guidance covering policy for professional standards reporting, a corruption prevention strategy, a toolkit to assess the vulnerability of forces to corruption and guidance for investigations. That is being carried through extremely energetically.

We recognise and support the action in general taken by the Metropolitan police and, for the reasons that I have outlined, I believe that we can have confidence in the force. Like his predecessor, the Commissioner is determined to tackle corruption in the Metropolitan police. As my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock said, corruption in the Metropolitan police is dealt with by its Complaints Investigation Bureau, CIB3, whose role is to investigate allegations of serious corruption. It is now firmly established.

In December 1998, the then Commissioner launched the Metropolitan police's corruption and dishonesty prevention strategy with six strands: prevention and detection; inclusion; focus and accountability; supervision and leadership; security, screening and vetting; and corruption and dishonesty proofing. I welcome the Commissioner's commitment to rid the Metropolitan police of corruption. I fully support his efforts to prevent corruption, to seek it out and to eradicate it. I commit myself to considering carefully my hon. Friend's points and believe that the measures that we have already taken on discipline and those that we

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shall take with regard to the complaints procedure will help to establish a process in which we can be truly confident.

Mr. Mackinlay: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not want to mislead the Chamber. I said that Mr. Hayman had invited me to a security briefing but, I want to make it clear that it was the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police who invited me to a security briefing with Hayman. However, that was still wrong in my view.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter on a point of order.

It being One o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 1 November 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Peru

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Robert Ainsworth.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): We last had a debate on Peruvian elections, which is still an ongoing issue, at my request on 19 April in this Chamber. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) and I had just returned from acting as observers at the election that was held on Sunday 9 April. We gave what we thought was a fair, but sadly, not a very inspiring account of a rigged and unsatisfactory election. We, along with several important bodies from the European Union as well as almost every international organisation involved in such matters, called for a re-run at least between the two main candidates, Mr. Fujimori and Mr. Toledo.

We pointed out that, if a re-run were to take place, it should be held on the basis of the need for that second round to be free and fair and seen to be so. The hon. Member for East Londonderry and I stressed that the democratic process, not personalities, was the key to our objectives, and that the inequality between the Peruvian Opposition and the huge state machine should be addressed.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you advise me how we should proceed, given that the Minister who is to reply to the debate has unfortunately not made it into the Chamber this morning? How will the Minister be able to respond adequately to the debate, given that he has already missed the opening remarks of the right hon. Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke)?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady is quite right. The Minister should be present in the Chamber to hear the debate from the beginning. However, I understand that he is not very far away, so the debate will continue.

Mr. Clarke: I understand the concerns of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), but, because of the storms, traffic conditions are appalling in London. The Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), and the Government Whip, who are both present, have assured me that when the Minister arrives they will acquaint him with the beginning of my remarks. Such procedure is not unknown on the Floor of the House and the importance of the subject and the fact that a debate on such issues may not be held for a long time suggests that the procedures, as you have outlined them, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are correct and that we should continue.

I shall return to the main points of the report on the first round of elections. The hon. Member for East Londonderry and I argued strongly for a second election to be held in the cause of true democracy and said that it was absolutely essential that European Union monitoring should continue to be crucial. I hope that I shall have the opportunity to re-emphasise that point later in the debate.

Decisions were not taken as rapidly as we would have wanted following the earlier debate. For a time, there was no proposal for a second round despite the ambiguity and unfairness of the first. Then there was a predicted and predictable political crisis in Peru, which intensified, I am sad to say.

Eventually—it seemed good news at the time—a second round was declared for 28 May. Mr. Toledo was the main challenger to the incumbent, President Fujimori, and all the other candidates withdrew on his behalf after the first round, due to their concerns about its nature. Unfortunately, for reasons that I fully understand, Mr. Toledo withdrew shortly before the polling date, saying that the electoral process was still flawed and that it was impossible to put the electronics and computers right in time to have a fair election and a fair result. He said that the second round was another sham and so refused to take part.

There was a great deal of support for Mr. Toledo's view. No evidence showed that lessons had been learned from the previous election and its unacceptable nature. The President insisted that the election would take place, reminded the world that voting was compulsory, and a result was then declared, seemingly on his behalf. It was a truly remarkable result: Fujimori received 51.2 per cent., Toledo, who had said that he was not standing, received 17.6 per cent., and 31. 2 per cent. of the ballot was spoilt papers, most in support of Toledo or decrying the nature of the election.

The crisis, which had already been identified, became more intense. The election was unacceptable and its result was not regarded as fair. Fujimori's standing was in question among large sections of the people of Peru and in the international community. The crisis came to a head on 28 July, on what was to be Mr. Fujimori's new investiture as President. There were widespread riots, and the scene was nasty. [*Interruption.*] I welcome the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz). I understand the reasons for his seven-minute delay and know that he is now being informed about our debate.

Six people died and more than 100 were injured in the riots. The situation was clearly unacceptable. It brought into question where Peru was headed, whether there was real democracy, and the credibility of the so-called elected president. On 16 September, Mr. Fujimori bowed to international pressure and called new elections. He said that he would not be a candidate, and there was a widespread sigh of relief. In many respects, that feeling of relief was short-lived, and will be until the position is clarified further. Mr. Fujimori's action may have been genuine, and the military was seen to back it, which I hope remains its position as its role is important.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), who is responsible for such matters, is

[Mr. Clarke]

abroad. He played a major role and is entitled to great credit for the current turn of events. His statement during the first elections, his reply to our previous debate and his contributions elsewhere have been most helpful in getting us thus far, although I do not want to crow too much about where exactly we are.

The role of the European Union and the Organisation of American States remains extremely important, and I know that the Minister will give due regard to their role in future events and to the need for the crucial, democratic election.

I agreed strongly with my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West when, following the announcement by President Fujimori of fresh elections, he said:

> I hope that the Peruvian authorities will recognise that there is a continuing role for the Organisation of American States in facilitating and strengthening the position of Peruvian democracy.

That remains the case and I hope that the Minister will enlighten us on the matter. However, it must be said strongly that some of us are deeply worried that on 14 October, Eduardo Latorre, the OAS permanent representative in Peru, announced that he was suspending talks with the Peruvian Government about reform and democratic elections, which had been agreed in an OAS-brokered accord. Mr. Latorre was worried that the Peruvian Government had passed through Congress a motion extending its present session by two weeks. That begged the question what is it all about. Are the elections for real? Does Fujimori intend to do what he said he would do? Does the military support him? Will the country have that precious democracy? Some saw the two-week postponement as Fujimori playing for time; he would not hesitate to do that if it were necessary to his strategy. He would play for time, for example, to help to protect some of his friends in the military, a subject to which I hope to return.

I share the concern about stability, which is important, especially in respect of the military. So is justice, however, and we are seeking both. As I said in April, whenever the elections take place, the democratic process should be seen to be the victor rather than any individual. As it stands, Mr. Toledo appears to be the main challenger for the post. During our visit for the first election, and given the view of the other candidates when they withdrew in his favour, it was clear that he represented the hopes of those who were in favour of peaceful change. Those of us who saw Mr. Toledo on the Sunday evening when things could have become even more difficult—there could have been even more bloodshed on the streets—felt that he behaved with grace, responsibility and understanding, yet he was, nevertheless, able to feel the pulse of the majority of people in Peru who genuinely wanted a democratic election leading to a democratic result.

During the Democrats convention in Los Angeles to choose the presidential candidate, I met Mr. Toledo briefly, in the presence of the former Vice-President Walter Mondale. I obtained from our brief conversation Mr. Toledo's acceptance of the fact that in Peru today, mindful of his influence, people acknowledge the need for that transparency and pluralism. What Mr. Toledo rightly demanded for his own candidature should be extended to all the other candidates, who should be free to enter into new elections. He agreed that the rights of all candidates were paramount. Mr. Toledo's position will be enhanced if he continues to express that view, and I have no reason to believe that he will not. In line with the European Union monitors and the international community, I believe that when the next election takes place, there must be balanced access to the broadcasting media. Unlike during the previous election, candidates should be entitled to fair coverage on television, radio and in the press. They should not be subjected to state-sponsored smears. The atmosphere must be right for a free election, which it certainly was not last time.

I wish to ask my hon. Friend the Minister an important question about the timetable for the election. The Peruvian Opposition are calling for the election to take place in January 2001, whereas the Peruvian Government prefer May 2001. It is legitimate to argue about the timing, but should not the priority be to establish a democratic framework rather than have an election as soon as possible just for the sake of it? However, the other side of the coin is that—consistent with the electoral machine performing to 100 per cent. efficiency, and with transparency and fairness—the people of Peru must feel that their senate and president are truly democratically elected. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response. I wonder whether the British Government have a particular view about the appropriate date or whether, like myself, they are still asking questions about it. If they do have a view, I look forward to hearing it.

I move on to the role of the European Union. I hope that the UK and the EU continue to work together to ensure that the election is seen to be fair. In August, the EU issued a declaration:

> The European Union reaffirms its support for the efforts made in the framework of the Organisation of American States to consolidate democracy in Peru. It hopes that all sectors of political life will be able to show their maturity and constructive willingness to begin to implement, as soon as possible, the timetable proposed by the High-level Mission of the OAS for strengthening public institutions and democratic coexistence in Peru.

It continued:

> The European Union calls on the Government of Peru to implement the democratic principles referred to in the Rio Declaration, which form the basis of a partnership between the European Union and Latin America.

I should like to ask my hon. Friend the Minister a few questions on that. In the light of the OAS suspending talks with the Government, can my hon. Friend shed light on any discussions that may have taken place between the EU and OAS in recent weeks, which sought to encourage the OAS to continue its role in Peru? What is the latest position on the partnership between the EU and Latin America? What ministerial discussions have been held with EU colleagues on recent circumstances in Peru? Finally, does my hon. Friend accept that when the election takes place, it is important for international observers to be present? Does he believe that the UK should be represented?

I now turn to the role of the European Parliament. Consistent with the role of the European Union, the European Parliament adopted resolutions—one on 15 June and another in October—on the presidential elections in Peru. They were occasioned by the crisis following the announcement by President Fujimori of his resignation and the intention to hold new elections.

Significantly, the European Parliament expressed its surprise at the turn taken by events, in particular the request to the Republic of Panama to grant political

asylum to the former national intelligence service adviser, Vladimiro Montesinos. I was pleased that Mr. Montesinos' request for asylum was refused, especially given accusations of his involvement in the trafficking of arms and drugs.

What is the view of my hon. Friend the Minister on the role, or better still the absence, of Mr. Montesinos in future? Considering his influence, he is a truly remarkable person. He is dangerous and sinister. Nevertheless, some aspects of the current circumstances are not without humour. On Friday 27 October, *The Scotsman*, a newspaper that would not usually be expected to report on such matters, produced an extremely interesting article that read almost like a novel. It was headed: "Fujimori leads search for former spymaster". In it, Fujimori was presented as a sort of Sherlock Holmes, trying to find Montesinos, a sort of cross between the Scarlet Pimpernel and the Artful Dodger. However, we are no nearer to finding out exactly where Montesinos is and what he is doing, and that could be serious.

Jeremy McDermott's excellent piece states:

> Peru's president has launched a manhunt for his former spymaster, shining light into the shadows where his former adviser once wielded power equal to his own.
>
> The president, Alberto Fujimori, surrounded by tight security, led the operation to find Vladimiro Montesinos, heading a search party on Wednesday night and into the early hours of yesterday, with sniffer dogs combing suspected hiding places while helicopters hovered in the vicinity.

That was an extremely important search. Later, the article states:

> Mr Montesinos has eluded capture, perhaps with the connivance of Peruvian security forces, the upper echelons of which he personally appointed over the last eight years

— not ideal circumstances for finding the suspect.

Worryingly, the article states:

> Fujimori critics see the hunt for Mr Montesinos as mere window dressing, and insist the spymaster is still in charge of the all-powerful military and the judicial system, and the president is either still in touch with him, or totally impotent.

It is extremely worrying if that last part is true, and any help that my hon. Friend the Minister can give in providing a United Kingdom input to deal with the problem would be welcome.

The European Parliament called on the European Union to undertake a special programme to give active support to the new phase of the democratic process in Peru and to co-ordinate the initiatives taken by member states. It added that it

> proposes to send a delegation to the Republic of Peru in order to obtain first-hand information regarding the actual political situation and the prospects for peaceful change.

I should like my hon. Friend the Minister to give us the latest information on the initiatives supporting democracy in light of recent developments and to tell us whether a delegation has visited Peru on behalf of the European Union, and if so what conclusions it reached.

I am reaching the end of my comments, Mr. Cook—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. It seems to be a weekly event, but I must remind all right hon. and hon. Members that the House, in its wisdom, when it agreed to hold parallel sittings here, decided that the meetings should be presided over by Deputy Speakers unless substitute Chairmen needed to be recruited.

Mr. Clarke: Such is my respect for you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I feel suitably humble about such a dreadful lapse. I apologise sincerely.

I am aware that other hon. Members wish to speak and I turn now to three important issues, which will impinge upon the election campaign itself, but which will not necessarily be resolved once the result is declared. My hon. Friend the Minister will not be surprised when I touch on the issue of human rights in Peru. Many things have been said, to their credit, by Amnesty International but here in Britain—and I pay tribute to them—the Peru Support Group has been immensely proactive and helpful.

Peruvian society has been suffering for a long time from systematic human rights abuses and a lack of good governance. Future relations between the European Union and Peru must be based on respect for human rights and democratic principles. The European Union has the right to say those things, if only because of its humanitarian contribution. The hon. Member for East Londonderry and I saw evidence of that when we were in Peru. I want that humanitarian aid to continue, but when we visited some of the shanty towns and saw that water was at last being delivered and roads were being provided by EU funding, I found it a little perverse that Mr. Fujimori was turning that into a vote-catching exercise. He took credit for what was being done, and by implication for the resources that were being made available by the EU. The role of the EU in giving that humanitarian aid is nevertheless underscored by that point.

In congratulating very warmly my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development and her Department on an excellent contribution that is reflected elsewhere in South America, I turn to an issue that that will be close to her heart. It is the sterilisation programme carried out by the Fujimori Government, which might be described as an anti-woman policy. I understand the population problems and the debate about them, but programmes should be based on consent. Information should also be available to men. The sort of enforcement of which there is clear evidence involving women is wholly unacceptable. It is an infringement of human rights and is repugnant both to our Government and to the international community. What measures will the Government take together with the EU and human rights organisations to establish programmes based on consent? Can my hon. Friend also enlighten us about the reforms recently announced by the Peruvian Government to their population and reproductive health programmes?

I want to turn finally to the issue of terrorism, on which, oddly enough–and I do not for one moment wish to be sparing of my praise even for Mr. Fujimori–every candidate in the election paid tribute to him. Without exception, they said that he had dealt with the matter and dealt with it well. Nevertheless, the way in which he wanted to alter the constitution was unacceptable, and inconsistent with their values.

Early in the 1980s internal stability was threatened by the emergence of the Maoist group Shining Path, which attempted to undermine the country's return to a

[Mr. Clarke]

civilian administration with violent attacks on Government and army locations. In 1995, President Fujimori introduced tough new laws to combat terrorism, aimed mainly at curbing the activities of Shining Path, which have apparently succeeded in reducing the number of deaths brought about by terrorist violence. Several prominent members of the group have been imprisoned. As I said, there was praise for the stand that the President took.

Nevertheless, a legacy remains to be dealt with. In May 1998, the President initiated a new anti-crime campaign, headed by the intelligence service appropriately enough called SIN. We were told that the reason for that was to deal with terrorism, but it went much further, interfering clearly and blatantly with individual civil rights. For example, it attacked several left-of-centre political groups. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, based in Brussels, says that the President has deliberately targeted trade unions. The ICFTU noted the widespread use of child labour in Peru today, which has continued even in the face of the elections. On 1 May 1998, Fujimori agreed new draconian laws, including sentences of up to 25 years for 16-year-olds, and trial of civilians by the military courts.

I expect that we all want to erase such past occurrences, and make progress. How do the Government plan to use their influence to end child labour in Peru, something for which they have campaigned very well elsewhere? What measures does my hon. Friend propose to ensure that military trials for civilians are ended, and replaced by procedures that meet international human rights standards? It would be helpful, in the context of those draconian measures, if the three judges who had the courage to go against President Fujimori when he sought to distort the constitution, and who declined to uphold his appeal, were at the very least reinstated and given the opportunity to continue with their work, instead of being penalised for attempting to prevent what is recognised as an outrage to Peru's democratic process.

I hope that the Minister will see that many hon. Members look forward to the forthcoming elections because they are important not only for Peru—of course the emergence of democracy in all its forms is important—but for South America. They are important also for this country, which rightly has the reputation of trying, when the case presents itself, to push the boat that bit further towards democracy, transparency and fairness. My heavens, nowhere more than in Peru is that approach needed.

10.3 am

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): First, I must declare an interest. It gives me pleasure to do so, because I was recently invited by the Peru Support Group to visit Peru on a fact-finding mission with an ad hoc delegation including Lord Avebury just before the inauguration of President Fujimori and the marcha de los cuatros suyos, which was one of the events that precipitated his standing down. The mission was sponsored by Christian Aid, by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development—CAFOD—and by War on Want. I am grateful to those organisations for making the visit possible because, as with most of us in Britain, my knowledge of Peru was extremely limited. One rarely sees a reference to matters Peruvian in the British press or media; the country does not normally show on our radar screens. That is unfortunate because it does matter, even if it is remote to us, because it is a crucial part of a region where democracy has a chequered history.

There is probably no country in South America about which one can say that democracy is truly established and flourishing—it certainly has not flourished in Peru for a long time. However, that country has presented a façade of democracy to the outside world, and I found the truth behind that façade profoundly shocking. The form of government could best be summarised as a quasi-military dictatorship pretending to be a democracy, and the manipulation done on every stratum of Peruvian society to achieve that result is truly shocking.

The visit showed me how appalling the social cost of the failure of democracy can be. Over the past 10 years, Peru has not progressed as most countries gradually do—in fact, it has regressed. Fifty-four per cent. of its population live in abject poverty, as defined by the measure of a dollar or less a day. That percentage is appalling and staggering. It must be the highest percentage of people living in poverty in any country—higher even than in India—yet Peru is internationally perceived as not poor, but a middle-income state. Owing to the appalling maldistribution of wealth, there are a few wealthy people and millions of very poor people. The percentage of poverty has increased alarmingly over the past 10 years, partly as a direct result of Fujimori's Administration and the unbridled application of what are laughingly called "neo-liberal" economic policies, which I would characterise as Thatcherism gone mad. For example, when the mining industry was privatised with massive job losses, where did those workers end up? They ended up in the shanty towns around Lima and other large cities, with no visible means of support because there is no social net.

Fujimori managed to control Shining Path, but at a massive cost, because members of the Peruvian military did not stop to draw a distinction when they came to a village. They did not stop to ask villagers whether they supported Shining Path or were loyal to the Government, but assumed that the villagers supported Shining Path and acted accordingly, with the result that nearly 1 million people were displaced from villages in the remote areas in which Shining Path was active. Those people also ended up in the shanty towns, living on less than a dollar a day.

The land used for peasant farming has been largely depopulated because farmers cannot get a realistic price for their produce. They cannot eke a living out of the land, so they end up in shanty towns around the major cities, with no water, depending on food aid. Lima has one third of the Peruvian population—more than 9 million people. Most live in shanty towns that have grown up during the past nine years. It is one of the most appalling places that I have ever seen, almost entirely as a result of its Government's policies.

The land—this is a nice trick—is reverting at knockdown prices to the people from whom it was originally distributed. When we visited the city of Ica, we saw large asparagus fields, owned by the daughter of

the President. I have taken to avoiding buying asparagus labelled Peruvian when I go to Sainsbury's, because I know where the profits are going and they are not going to the Peruvian people.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) said, it is supremely ironic that the President has used the issue of international aid to his electoral advantage. He has created massive poverty, but has turned it to his advantage by manipulation so bizarre that I am still trying to get my head around it. My right hon. Friend has described some of the extraordinary features of the Peruvian elections. However, it is not just a question of bent elections; the whole country has been bent. There is no way that such a bent election could be tolerated if the whole social structure of the country had not been systematically corrupted and perverted, which sadly is what has happened in Peru.

The fraudulence of the election beggars belief. We are all familiar with counts in our, fortunately, well and tightly controlled elections. If the returning officer finds one ballot paper too many or too few, he goes through agonies until he can account for it. However, in the Peruvian election, a million more votes were counted than there were people on the register. In this country, we would be delighted if we could get anywhere near 100 per cent. turnout, but if anyone tried to claim 110 per cent. turnout, we would smell a large rat. On that index alone, the election was completely fraudulent.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston gave the voting figures in the second round of the election, in which only one candidate was declared. It is even doubtful whether Mr. Fujimori received more than 50 per cent. of the votes in that round, because I am told that exit polls showed a lower figure for Mr. Fujimori. In the first round of elections, there was a large discrepancy between the figures recorded at exit polls and the actual figures that were finally declared.

We heard allegations of extreme ballot-rigging. The name of Mr. Toledo had been cut off several hundred thousand ballot papers. People may have wanted to vote for him, but his name simply was not on the ballot paper. Several hundred thousand papers were issued with a mark already made against Fujimori's name. Other marked papers were given to the women responsible for running the community kitchens in the barrios distributing European food aid; they were told that if they handed over their marked paper and voted for Mr. Fujimori, they would be given a new paper in return and if they showed that they would be paid. Those are small indications of what happened on the day.

Computers counted and registered the votes; there were difficulties with electronic counting in the London mayoral elections, but in this case there were allegations, which I take very seriously, that the numbers in the computer were altered, which is easy to do, especially if observers are not allowed into the count. My information is that international observers did not monitor the counting process. Thus, there was an election in which the ballot was not secret, and the counting process was not transparent and monitored. An election cannot possibly be fair under such circumstances, especially as most of the electoral sins were committed long before the election day.

A good example is the misuse of international aid to which we are a major European contributor. The aid is largely in the form of food, sent in packages clearly marked "EU" with the blue circle and the ring of stars. It used to be distributed through non-governmental organisations, notably Caritas, which still has the warehouses and the capacity for distribution. However, the responsibility for distribution was assumed by the Government, who set up their own agency for distribution, called PRONAA, which repackaged the food labelled with that name. The community kitchens depended on PRONAA for their primitive equipment and for the food.

The system was run by women, some of whom we talked to. We met a cross-section of Peruvian society, from generals whom Fujimori had sacked to community kitchen workers who had also been sacked because they expressed their opposition to him.

Community kitchen workers who did not support Fujimori and put up his picture in their kitchen did not get supplies and were not allowed to operate. People had to survive on the rations, which did not include meat, a luxury that they could not afford. They were living on vegetable stew and if they were lucky they could add stock, made by boiling up bones. They were poor people, living on a poor diet. The irony is that Fujimori got most of his votes from those poor people. That is one example of the misuse of aid.

I found the way in which American food aid was used equally disturbing. I take this as truth, as the US ambassador carefully explained it to me. The American aid, which presumably came from the mid-western grain belt surpluses, was sold on the market in Peru for prices that undercut those of native farmers. That forced more peasants off the land, into the barrios, and into dependence on food aid. The proceeds of the sale of food were used for agricultural projects. That was used by the Fujimori Government as yet another opportunity for clientalism, because only Fujimori supporters receive the benefit of support for their agricultural projects.

One cannot have an open lead-up to an election unless there is open access to the media. That has certainly not existed in Peru until now. Opposition candidates are denied access to all the terrestrial television channels. They have only recently been allowed access to a cable channel. It carefully followed our visit to Lima, but I do not know how it managed to survive under the Montesinos regime. A couple of terrestrial channels that showed programmes exposing some of Fujimori's misdoings were confiscated from their owners, who were prosecuted.

If journalists were bold enough to put their heads above the parapet and print anything seriously critical of Fujimori, they were harassed, tortured and even killed. Most tried sensibly to keep their heads just below the parapet, so the Opposition parties could get their hands on little printed media. A couple of brave titles survived—I do not know how—but with only limited circulation. The so-called prensa chicha, the yellow press, is read by vast numbers of the population,

[Dr. Desmond Turner]

especially those with a low standard of literacy. It is a little like some of our less salubrious press titles, being a mixture of pornography and Government propaganda.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Which one is that?

Dr. Turner: I know that there is such a thing as parliamentary privilege, but I had better be careful.

We heard strong allegations that the prensa chicha was funded by the Government. There were also manipulations of Government advertising. In the lead-up to the elections, the Government's especially large advertising budget went only to organs with the right editorial policy. Lo and behold, the supply of advertising revenue stopped immediately when the election started.

I could go on and on listing the pre-election abuses, but the systematic human rights abuses are most important, too. More than 250 people are in prison and have been there for about 10 years. As far as one knows they are quite innocent; they have been locked up without any evidence because of alleged association with terrorism. They have not been tried and their cases have not been reviewed. An independent tribunal has recommended 58 of them for release; it found that there was no evidence against them. They are still in prison.

There is no permanent independent judiciary in Peru. The only judges are on provisional appointments. That somewhat colours their judgment in court. If they give the wrong judgment their appointment is not renewed. There was a system of appointing permanent judiciary, but that has gone. We receive bitter and worried messages from the Society of Advocates in Peru. The intelligentsia, as represented by all civil institutions, universities and so on, have been systematically corrupted by Fujimori. All senior university appointments are Government appointments. At the same time, more than 6,000 lecturers were dismissed.

A great concern when it comes to replacing Fujimori with a stable democratic alternative is the fact that there is no concerted Opposition, only a generalised feeling that it is wrong and has to change. That is because Fujimori has also systematically repressed political parties so that there are no genuine political party structures, as we would recognise them, and no identifiable Opposition manifesto for alternative government. Those are serious weaknesses if the country is to be revised.

We need to look at the role the international community can play in trying to help Peruvians resolve their problems. In the last analysis, only Peruvians can do that. But there is a great deal that we and the international community can do. We must take a long hard look at the way in which international aid goes to Peru to ensure that it cannot be used by the Government as an electoral weapon. There are strong NGOs on the ground in Peru. I would certainly advocate that they should be the conduit for all aid to Peru in future. With clear international accountability no accusations can be levelled.

We must do something, although I do not know how, to try to support democratic parties in Peru. Above all we must impress on the Organisation of American States that its role as envisaged by the suspended concordat is no less critical now than it was before Fujimori appeared to stand down and to promise new elections. Until Fujimori and his Government are prepared to stand back and allow internationally organised and accountable election processes, there will always be a nagging doubt that Fujimori is trying to retain his power by another method, as he has consistently over the past 10 years.

I conclude by stressing the need for us and the rest of the international community to help to secure a stable future for Peru and for the continent of South America. That need is as pressing as it ever was. I hope that the UK Government will play a full role in the process.

10.30 am

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a short contribution to this morning's debate. In common with some of my colleagues, I have visited Peru on several occasions. It is eight years since my last visit, but, sadly, this morning's comments are as pressing now as they were in 1992.

Peru's problem lies in the combined rule of President Fujimori and Vladimiro Montesinos—a corrupt core that has infected the whole body politic. I have seen that for myself, with respect to the judiciary, the military, the economic sphere and civil society. In the judicial sphere, there has been considerable comment from the American Bar Association and international jurors about the military courts. I saw the results of those military courts when I visited Castro Castro prison in Lima and spoke to innocent people who found themselves behind bars for 20 years or even for the rest of their lives because their neighbour had reported them to the authorities. Back-up, witnesses or evidence were not necessary to condemn those people. I have spoken to them and I know that the judicial system is corrupt.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) mentioned human rights. I visited the valleys outside Lima in which bodies were dropped after being tortured—and it is still going on. We heard about farmers leaving their farms to go into shanty towns. Drugs are a huge problem in the country, but we shall never overcome it if we allow a system under which farmers in Huagua valley, for example, can earn more for coca growing than for ordinary crops. We in the international community must deal with that pressing problem.

As to the economy, it is shameful to call it a privatisation programme. It is simply a rip-off with thousands of people losing their jobs. There is no genuine party political structure, only bribery on a country-wide scale. The international community must recognise that that is what is happening in Peru. We must establish fraternal political links, particularly with non-governmental organisations and the good indigenous people of Peru. The country needs to be built up democratically from the floor. The international community should acknowledge the corruption, but realise that there are good people in civil society—in the barrios, for example, where women help by working in the soup kitchens. I took those memories back with me. The international community must demonstrate solidarity and ensure that not just a veneer, but real democracy takes root in Peru.

10.33 am

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): I start by congratulating the right hon. Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) on securing this debate. It is the second occasion on which he has raised these important issues in this Chamber. His insight into what is happening in Peru has been invaluable. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) on his contribution, particularly his detailed and absorbing analysis of what took place in the elections. He demonstrated clearly how rotten to the core is the electoral system in Peru. His knowledge, based on such recent visits, was invaluable.

None of us who attended the previous Westminster Hall debate on Peru could have expected the dramatic events of the past six months. Just as the world had become resigned to the depressing conclusion that Mr. Fujimori had steamrollered through the extension of his presidency, the wheels appear to have fallen off during the past couple of months. Mr. Fujimori's announcement that he would stand down on 16 September—less than two months into his third presidential term—has suddenly given the people of Peru some fresh hope, but their understandable optimism must be sobered by the assessment of the scale of the task ahead. The stark realities of turning that window of opportunity into a genuine democracy will be very hard, as the contributions to this morning's debate have demonstrated.

It is now a month since Mr. Fujimori's so-called resignation and it is clear that both he and Vladimiro Montesinos, the former chief of the national intelligence service, will not disappear from the political scene as easily as we would like them to. Peru is an apple that is rotten to the core, not only in terms of bribery and corruption and the way in which its election system operates, but in terms of the severe poverty that we have heard about this morning. Since 1992 when Mr. Fujimori temporarily closed the Congress and the supreme court, and relaunched state institutions under his control, the army has enjoyed a central role in running Peru's affairs. Mr. Montesinos has hand-picked many of the army's commanders. Four regional commanders were former classmates at the military academy and even his brother-in-law was put in charge of the garrison in Lima.

How can some of the difficulties be resolved? The diagnosis is clear: Peru needs a democratic framework if the next elections are to stand a chance of being fair. Transitions from an authoritarian rule are invariably messy and, at the very least, Peru now faces several months of instability. The key question is whether the armed forces can be persuaded to accept the genuine democratic reforms that are needed. Reforms in the media, the electoral authorities and the courts will all have to take place if elections are to be meaningful. I strongly believe that the army should have no place in politics, but achieving that position in Peru will clearly not be easy.

Last weekend, Mr. Fujimori sacked key chiefs in the army, air force and navy who had been loyal to the disgraced Mr. Montesinos. However, we should treat such sackings with caution because it has been suggested by observers that all Mr. Fujimori has done is to replace those chiefs with other supporters.

On 16 September, Mr. Fujimori promised that he would deactivate the national intelligence service, but that action was not signed into law until a month later, thus generating fears that supporters of Fujimori, agents and equipment had been smuggled out into various military installations during the intervening period. Let us not forget that the national intelligence unit is believed to be responsible for ordering death squad killings, taking protection money from drug traffickers, manipulating the media and corrupting the armed forces. It is deeply disturbing if individuals from the unit are still active.

The Government and military in Peru must be separated, which involves removing army commanders who are linked to the previous era. The resulting military and intelligence service must be made as transparent as possible and that should be coupled with the establishment of an independent prosecution service and judiciary. It could begin with the reinstatement of the three constitutional tribunal judges who were dismissed by Mr. Fujimori after they had attempted to block his changes to the constitution.

Other steps need to be taken. The elections need to be fair and democratic. That requires the handing back of the private television company to its ousted owner. Next time, Opposition parties that try to fight fair elections must be guaranteed airtime on popular television stations. At the time of the previous election, the costs were set at deliberately high levels to preclude that from happening. In addition, the discredited electoral authority needs to be fully reformed. One head is currently under investigation and the other head has resigned. It is important that a new head is appointed who can then begin to tackle the whole electoral process that we have heard about from the hon. Member for Kemptown and ensure that there is an accurate electoral register.

It is important that the international community plays its part in solving the problems in Peru. It is vital that outside bodies, such as the Organisation of American States, promote productive discourse between all parties. A genuinely democratic order must be based on an effective system of checks and balances. As Peru attempts to begin such a transition, it is important that outside forces, including Britain and the European Union, play a major role in attempting to put the country in the right direction. I hope that the Minister will comment on the action that we plan to take. A solid start would be to persuade the Administration to return to the jurisdiction of the Interamerican convention on human rights. There are clear human rights problems, which need to be solved.

We need to recognise that if the current issues are to be resolved and if democratic elections are to take place, perhaps the Opposition parties will need help with techniques for fighting a proper campaign. There are major difficulties ahead for Peru, but the first priority is to ensure that Peru can lay the foundations of a new and lasting democratic order, beginning with urgent reform of its flawed institutions.

10.39 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): First, I join the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) in congratulating the right hon. Member for Coatbridge

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) on securing the debate. His passion for Peru is well known in the House and he was ably supported by the hon. Members for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) and for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall); the latter obviously has an abiding interest in the country's future.

I am delighted that the Minister is with us. I hope that in addition to providing us with an assessment of what Her Majesty's Government will be able to contribute to the election process in Peru, he will, from his perspective as Minister for Europe, tell us what the European Union proposes to do in that respect.

When Alberto Fujimori took office in 1990, all was not well with Peru, as those present would no doubt acknowledge. The Administration of Alan García left behind some woeful figures. The monthly rate of inflation ranged from 25 per cent. to 32 per cent. in the second half of 1989, exceeded 40 per cent. in June 1990 and mounted to an incredible 78 per cent. by July. The central Government deficit increased from 4 per cent. of gross domestic product in January 1990 to 9 per cent. by May. The money supply of the country increased six times over from January to the end of July and the new Fujimori Government had to act quickly. They did so, as we have heard, with some criticism from many quarters. They acted on privatisation, deregulation and structural adjustment and those were painful measures. However, from an economic perspective, Peru had been taken by the scruff of the neck and there were improvements.

The figures speak for themselves. Gross domestic product went up from $28.8 billion in 1989 to $57.2 billion in 1999 and inflation came down from a staggering 2,926.6 per cent. in 1989—and then 7,650 per cent. in 1990—to 3.8 per cent. in 1999. We must ask ourselves why, with success like that, anyone would want to tamper with the so-called democratic process. Sadly, that is exactly what Fujimori did. On 5 April 1992, following a disagreement with Congress over proposed economic and political reforms, the President staged a military-backed self-coup, shutting down Congress and the courts. A new election was set and not surprisingly he won his first term on 9 April 1995. I say that it was his first term; the new constitution that he drew up allowed a President two consecutive terms and his supporters argue that his first term did not count since he was elected under a previous constitution.

The election in 2000 was set for 9 April with a second round on 28 May. As we have heard, the Opposition candidates faced major handicaps. One was the media. With a few brave exceptions they are completely subservient to Mr. Fujimori. The television has been cowed by threats of withdrawal of Government advertising. For example, Mr. Baruch Ivcher, an Israeli-born immigrant, was stripped of both his Peruvian nationality and his television station after it screened reports concerning Montesinos, Mr. Fujimori's intelligence chief. Mr. Ivcher's former station now carries a diet similar to that of the yellow press and other stations simply ignore the activities of Opposition candidates. It is quite unacceptable.

Alejandro Toledo, the Opposition presidential candidate, soon discovered how the system works. On the campaign's final day, the President's closing rally was at one point being transmitted simultaneously by all seven free access television channels. Those of the Opposition candidates did not appear at all. On election day, only one free access channel provided full coverage, and it switched abruptly to a Mexican comedy film when Mr. Toledo's protests began. For ordinary Peruvians, there was a complete news blackout.

Another handicap is that Mr. Fujimori has built a powerful political organisation that blurs the division between Government, state and party. Known as Peru 2000, the machine has been set up on corporatist lines, working in shanty towns and among peasant farmers and small businesses. In Lima's poorer surburbs, once independent community leaders have been won over with the offer of paid jobs distributing Government food aid in return for supporting the Fujimori cause. Mr. Fujimori also has the backing of the armed forces, an expensive and sophisticated intelligence service and a pliant congressional majority.

Many hon. Members have discussed the abuses of the elections in 2000. Three days after the presidential election, the authorities announced that with almost 98 per cent. of the ballots counted, Mr. Fujimori had 49.84 per cent. of the vote, just short of an absolute majority, which meant a run-off against Alejandro Toledo. However, the first round of the presidential elections had been one of the dirtiest election campaigns in Peru's history. The Opposition complained of irregularities, and we have already heard from the hon. Member for Kemptown how Mr. Toledo's name was excised from the voting slips—one of the most blatant abuses.

Suspicions arose when the national electoral processes office, the Oficina Nacional de Procesos Electorales, which had promised a result within hours of the vote, was issuing partial results showing Mr. Fujimori within a whisker of an absolute majority, despite observers finding that most of the ONPE's computer centres were closed. Mr. Eduardo Stein, head of the observer team sent by the OAS, said that the results were "coming out of nowhere" and that "something very sinister" was going on. It is hardly surprising that Mr. Toledo withdrew from the run-off, as the right hon. Member for Coatbridge and Chryston said, and that Fujimori claimed victory.

Events move quickly in Peru. A month ago, Fujimori seemed to be firmly in charge. He had fired Montesinos, the former head of intelligence. It does not help someone's political cause when his spy chief surfaces on a video, allegedly paying $15,000 to buy the political support of an Opposition member of Congress. He announced the dissolution of the intelligence service, which has the appropriate acronym SIN, and called new elections in which he pledged not to participate. I suppose that he should be congratulated on that. Indeed, Peruvian Opposition leaders and the United States Government hailed his decision to step aside and hold new elections, while Montesinos fled in disgrace to an uncertain exile in Panama.

Sinister events have overtaken the delicate democracy. With his claim for political asylum rejected, Montesinos seems to have turned the tables on Fujimori, and has returned to Peru and gone into hiding. Varying reports have been received about what is happening to him. However, there is a belief in certain quarters that although Fujimori says that he is firmly in

charge, Montesinos and his cronies, who command Peru's armed forces, may force Fujimori to step aside sooner than expected to create a power vacuum into which Montesinos can step. I hope that the Minister will enlighten us on his assessment of the latest developments.

We all hope for a peaceful transitional period and that Peru can achieve the democracy that it so desires. The latest report suggests that the election should take place no later than 8 April next year, and both the Government and the Opposition in Peru seem to have agreed on that. We welcome that development and hope that the Minister can confirm it today.

It is not all doom and gloom for Peru. Peru has come a long way, but it is far from perfect. I finish by quoting two paragraphs from a letter sent to me by the Ambassador from Peru, Mr. Gilbert Chauny, who tries to keep hon. Members informed. He should be congratulated on his work in keeping us up to speed with developments in Peru, although I do not always agree with what he writes in his letters. However, two paragraphs of a letter that he wrote in June suggest that there is a political will to move towards an improved democracy. He writes:

> Nevertheless, we must recognise that all countries have not and cannot consolidate simultaneously the same level of democracy. In the case of Peru, we have met many difficulties in this regard. We are all aware of the deep crisis we experienced at the end of the 80s, which evidently slowed us in our objectives. Democracy presumes peace and reciprocal trust, it implies co-operation and common work. On the other hand, terrorism brings insecurity and fear, people change and this weakens democracy. That is why building democracy has been difficult and risky in our country. It has been necessary to start laying down the foundations for making possible a productive environment, with incentives, with a real desire to join efforts to attain the welfare of our people. We were, therefore, obliged to obtain both internal as well as external peace.
>
> Nevertheless, much has been achieved. As Peruvians, we would like not to be judged for what we still need to accomplish in order to reach a utopian level of democracy; but to be judged for what we have already accomplished with great effort, and for our strong commitment to further improve and perfect our democracy.

I hope that the Minister will reassure us that his Government will help support the Peruvians in their commitment to further and improve their democracy.

10.50 am

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Keith Vaz): The debate has been excellent, and I am sorry that I could not be present to hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) open it. My right hon. Friend has taken up causes with great passion and eloquence throughout his parliamentary career. The way in which he put the case today shows the strong feelings he has about Peru, democracy, international development and human rights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, wanted to be present, as he is responsible for that area. He has asked me to pass on his good wishes to my right hon. Friend. Important parliamentary commitments abroad prevent him from attending the debate, but he spoke in the previous debate on Peru and set out clearly the Government's position. In his speeches both in Parliament and publicly, he has expressed the Government's concerns about the situation in that country.

The speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) was better than any Foreign Office brief that any Minister could receive, and was peppered by personal recollections that none of us could really gain from official visits. His insights, and those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston, help me to assess the situation and help my colleagues in the Foreign Office to consider future policy directions.

One matter was the subject of all contributions to the debate, including those from my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), and the hon. Members for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) and for Winchester (Mr. Oaten), who made his usual succinct speech. There were serious irregularities in the process leading up to the presidential and congressional elections held earlier this year. My right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston and the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), who monitored the first round of voting in April, rightly drew attention to those problems, as have missions from the Organisation of American States, the Carter Centre, the Electoral International Reform Services and our European Union partners.

I assure my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston that my colleagues in the European Union are considering the matter carefully, but no decision has been made about a monitoring group that might attend the next elections. The EU, because of its historical connections with that part of the world, considers those matters carefully, and my right hon. Friend's comments and those of other hon. Members will be brought to the attention of the relevant Commissioner and other member states.

There are doubts about the constitutional propriety of President Fujimori's decision to stand for a third successive term. After the controversial—to judge from the descriptions of the voting procedures, the term is a lame one—second-round voting system, we have heard disturbing accounts of Congress men being bribed to defect to the governing party and other such stories. We are aware of those issues, so we welcomed the decision of the OAS Foreign Ministers in Windsor, Ontario on 4-6 June to help the Peruvians re-energise their democracy. A list of 29 points was drawn up. Eduardo Latorre, the former Foreign Minister of the Dominican Republic, who has already been mentioned, was appointed to oversee the task.

We also welcomed President Fujimori's announcement on 16 September that fresh presidential and congressional elections would be held, that there would be a thorough investigation of all bribery allegations, and that the national intelligence service would be de-activated. We remain concerned about the negative influence exercised by President Fujimori's former intelligence adviser, Vladimiro Montesinos, on the re-energising of the democracy. We have heard about the attempts to find out where he is, and are worried about the effect that his unexpected return on 23 October, after he had spent a month in Panama, could have on the situation in Peru. Whether through Sherlock Holmes or any of the methods being adopted by President Fujimori to find him, we hope that he will swiftly be located and brought before the Peruvian courts to face the charges against him.

[Mr. Keith Vaz]

We have also been encouraged by the determination of all parties in the OAS-sponsored talks not to allow recent events, including the return of Montesinos, to impede progress on the talks or for new elections. The democratisation process has inevitably had ups and downs. We are glad that the representatives of the Government and Opposition appear to have agreed on the constitutional changes needed to reduce the current presidential and congressional mandates to one year, and to permit fresh elections in 2001. It is also encouraging that a specific date for those elections—8 April—is likely to be formally announced in the next few days. We shall watch the situation carefully, but I know that the announcement will please my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston and other hon. Members.

We urge the Peruvian Government and Opposition representatives to show flexibility and moderation, with a view to ensuring real progress towards democracy on the basis of the 29 points. We hope that special emphasis will be placed on ensuring that the playing field of the election in April 2001 will be much more level than that of the previous election. That especially means that all parties and candidates must have equitable access to the media, and that the reform of electoral and judicial authorities is ensured.

The British Government will continue to support efforts to aid the democratic process through expertise funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development. I appreciate what was said about my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development and the work of her Department by my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston. Given his background in international development, it was real praise. We want free, fair and transparent elections and to ensure that Peru moves forward. As the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham said, we have come a long way, but there is further to travel before the people of Peru feel that they can have the Government whom they deserve.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We now move to the next debate.

Swine Fever (Norfolk and Suffolk)

10.59 am

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I am delighted to have the opportunity to bring this issue to the attention of the House, because the outbreak of swine fever in East Anglia on 8 August has had a crippling effect on pig farmers in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex and a major impact on the local farming community.

I am delighted to be joined in the Chamber by my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) and the hon. Members for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) and for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). Several other colleagues from the region cannot be present, although farms in their areas have been affected, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) and my hon. Friends the Members for Central Suffolk and Ipswich, North (Mr. Lord)—a Deputy Speaker—for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring), for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) and for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley). Many of them have been in contact with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and have received representations from pig farmers in their areas.

This swine fever outbreak is expected to cost the pig industry about £20 million. About 1,200 pig producers were trapped by the movement restrictions in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. It is calculated that they have lost about £4 million and bank borrowings are rising every day. The United Kingdom's largest pig producing company—BOCM Pauls—says that about £2 million is owed by producers in the surveillance zone. By any calculation, that is a massive potential indebtedness, which affects not only the pig producers, but the whole farming community in our area and has a knock-on effect on the entire local economy.

To put the crisis in perspective, let me give the figures that I obtained this morning. The Minister may have more up-to-date figures. About 175,000 pigs have been killed since 8 August—115,000 of them under the welfare scheme, which means that they were clean, healthy pigs. Other pigs have been killed on the farms. That is an enormous number. Nearly all the pigs killed under the welfare scheme were killed at an abattoir in my constituency.

Pig farmers and their families in our area have been devastated by the outbreak. Members of Parliament frequently lobby or make representations on behalf of their constituents. We are all guilty of using hyperbole at times, but those of us in the area know what an impact the outbreak has had. The men and women affected had already endured a pretty awful two and a half years. They were only just recovering from the downturn in the pig market. This spring, things were just beginning to pick up and now they have been hit again. For those whose pigs were directly affected, it has been a horror story. For hundreds of others, all sorts of restrictions have meant that they stand a chance of going out of business. Many have had to lay off workers and there is a deep feeling of helplessness.

All that has happened in a sector of farming that has, by any definition, adopted the highest standards of animal welfare and efficiency, certainly compared with most UK competitors. I am sure that we can all find

examples of pig farmers who do not meet those high standards. However, as the Minister said at the Meat and Livestock Commission breakfast, at which the national pig awards were made, Ministers accept that that sector of farming has been outstanding. Pig farmers are, therefore, depressed and angry. They look to politicians, in particular Ministers, for short-term remedies and long-term answers.

The crisis has been going on for three months. For almost all that time, Parliament has been in recess. Pig farmers in East Anglia, the local community, the media and all MPs have been frustrated at being unable to question Ministers and hold them to account. Comments are often made about the relevance of Parliament today, the fact that it has been sidelined and that Members of Parliament simply draw a large salary and do not do much else. However, it has been brought home to me and many colleagues this summer that when Parliament is not sitting, not only constituents but Members of Parliament are frustrated by not being able to get answers from Ministers. When Parliament is not sitting there is, strangely, a democratic deficit.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Would the hon. Gentleman concede that Baroness Hayman paid four visits and met pig producers in Norfolk and Suffolk in the recess?

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): It is indeed the case that the Minister of State in the other place has her second home in my constituency. On two occasions she found it possible to visit a single farmer on her way home. The visits were carried out in extreme secrecy, as the press were not informed until afterwards. At the beginning of the outbreak, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I say this for the clarification of the House—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. We are already stretching the rules by having one intervention on another. I should hate to allow an intervention to become a speech.

Mr. Simpson: Obviously you understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that feelings are running high. I shall return shortly to ministerial responsibility, but the hon. Member for Norwich, North raised the matter. I am speaking not only as a Conservative Member, but on behalf of many pig farmers who have suggested to me that the ministerial appearances have been like drawing teeth. Indeed, at the first appearance, the Minister in the other place was going to a small meeting near Bury St. Edmunds when she was effectively forced to come to a large meeting to hear the views of several hundred pig farmers. That is well recognised.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): Does my hon. Friend also recognise that not only have Ministers failed to visit the area properly, they have failed to answer correspondence? I have written three times to the Minister and I have not had one reply.

Mr. Simpson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I shall give an example in a few minutes.

After taking into account all the external extenuating circumstances surrounding the outbreak of swine fever, people in Norfolk, Suffolk and, until recently, Essex, have felt let down by Ministers. Since 8 August, I have been asked continually when would the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food come to Norfolk and Suffolk to see the crisis for himself and to talk to pig farmers. It is no good the junior Minister coming four times. The right hon. Gentleman promised today at the national pig awards that he would come to East Anglia in the near future to have discussions with local pig farmers and others.

Colleagues from other parties will say that I am merely trying to make partisan political points, but this question has been put to me by a large number of pig farmers who may or may not vote for me. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food promised at the Labour party conference on 28 September to come and find out at first hand by the time that Parliament met on 23 October. He has broken that promise. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition was able to attend a meeting on 17 October in Norfolk to hear the concerns of pig farmers. The failure of the responsible Cabinet Minister to come and see for himself bears directly on the anger and frustration felt by pig farmers and others that this attack of swine fever has not been handled well.

The first priority for everyone has obviously been to prevent the spread of swine fever and make certain that it is completely eradicated. However, pig farmers have asked me if the policy of Ministers and officials harmed that first priority. On behalf of the pig farmers in my constituency, I have some direct questions for the Minister of State, which I want her to answer now.

Welcome though the lifting of restrictions in Essex and Norfolk have been, to date 242 pig producers are involved and more than 1,000 are still locked in to restrictions. Pig farmers and the public want Ministers to answer the following questions. What was the cause of this outbreak of swine fever? Was it caused by a pig's consumption of infected material discarded by a member of the public? Was that source an infected pig product from outside the United Kingdom? If so, what action will the Minister take to curb illegal imports of meat products and to enforce higher standards of traceability and warranty on the importers of meat products so that the United Kingdom's standards are met and can be proven to be so?

Given the slow and at times chaotic response of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to the outbreak in the first few weeks, what operational procedures did MAFF have in place, based upon the previous swine fever outbreak in 1986? Will there be at least a Ministry assessment of lessons learned from the outbreak, so that if we are faced with a similar outbreak, procedures will be in place to deal with it?

Does the Minister believe that MAFF had, or still has, sufficient resources to cope with the outbreak? Farmers have given me countless examples. They are unable to get answers from MAFF, and there is order and counter order, with frequent changes of personnel. Even taking into account the fact that the outbreak happened in August, the chaos and confusion made it even more frustrating for pig farmers trying to get a common line from the Ministry.

There is particular anxiety about the time that it takes to obtain the results of blood tests on animals subject to movement—it took 27 days, on average, for results that should have been known within eight to 10 days. That puts an ever-greater strain on pig farmers.

[Mr. Simpson]

The restrictions placed on the movement of pigs have led to gross overcrowding and suffering. Pig farmers are amazed that although MAFF claims that animal welfare is its responsibility, it closed the pig farms on 9 August but the welfare disposal scheme was not introduced until the end of that month. Is the Minister prepared to take responsibility for the serious decline in the standards of pig slaughter? Slaughterers are paid £1 per pig, and slaughtering consists mainly of shooting pigs with a 2.2 rifle with an enlarged bore, which, to say the least, is pretty bloody.

Has MAFF been constrained in its efforts to deal with the crisis by financial restrictions imposed by the Treasury? If MAFF had been able to extract £10 million to £15 million from the Treasury at the outset, many of the operational problems could have been met.

Finally, there is the matter of compensation, which is of great interest to pig farmers—and, I suspect, to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—but is also the cause of great frustration to them. The laggard way in which the Ministry has responded to this crucial issue is seen by pig farmers, the wider farming community and people who live in rural areas as too little, too late. Pig farmers have never been subsidised and have been proud to stand on their own feet to meet the challenges of animal welfare, but the incomes of pig farmers caught up in the surveillance zone have collapsed, while their debts have mounted through no fault of their own. Indeed, they have had to find the funds to provide the necessary accommodation for the extra pigs crowded on to their farms, which they have been unable to move.

I remind the House that the Government first offered £35 for animals that weighed more than 60 kg and £10 for smaller pigs, despite the fact that the average cost of each pig lost would have been nearly £100. As a result of pressure from the farming community, the media and politicians, Ministers were then forced to offer £50 plus an additional £15 levy.

For a month, Ministers have been considering a revised compensation scheme suggested by the National Pig Association. No reply was received. The House may be interested to know that at the breakfast attended by some of us this morning, courtesy of the Meat and Livestock Commission—it was to celebrate British pig products and bestow the National Pig Association award—I was told that the Minister of State rather than the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was expected to make the award. However, in the event, the Minister appeared and made a statement—not to the House, but to the National Pig Association—accepting a revised scheme of compensation. My colleagues and I have not yet had a chance to study the details, but any refinement is welcome. It would have been more appropriate if the right hon. Gentleman had made a statement to the House. That, after all, is what Mr. Speaker has been saying in the past fortnight. I am not making a nit-picking parliamentary point; it is important because of the parliamentary deficit of the past three months. Although the revised scheme is welcome in general terms, the farming community and politicians on both sides will want to examine it in detail.

The crucial point for the Minister is that when the compensation will be paid is as important as how much. Initially, the National Pig Association believed that as a result of legal and financial problems, the first payments would not be made until spring 2001. It is no exaggeration to say that if we have to wait that long and the banks are unwilling to wait, the pig industry in East Anglia will face considerable collapse. I welcome the revised scheme, but there is a need for much greater honesty and clarity.

The past three months have been a disaster for our pig farmers. They are frustrated and angry and feel that Ministers and MAFF, having displayed lethargy and a lack of grip, lie behind the crisis. The Minister of State will doubtless say that she was working hard throughout August, September and October, which is partly true. Other questions must be asked, and pig farmers in my area do not gain that impression.

It was a mistake for the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food not to have visited our area within a few weeks to listen to pig farmers and show that he was, as he claimed, directing the situation from Whitehall. The right hon. Gentleman is in danger of being regarded, without too much hyperbole, as a caricature of a first world war general—"I feel your pain and I am dealing with the paperwork". The Minister of State is shaking her head, but if she visited my constituency and met some pig farmers, she would find that that was so. I urge the right hon. Gentleman to fulfil the pledge that he gave at the Labour party conference and again this morning—to come to Norfolk and Suffolk, meet pig farmers and understand the extent of the crisis. If a financial package is not introduced quickly, a large part of our pig industry will be destroyed, with enormous knock-on effects on the farming community. He owes it to the pig farmers, their families and the wider farming communities of Norfolk and Suffolk.

11.18 am

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am pleased to speak in this important debate. I represent an Essex division, which comes within two miles of the Suffolk border, so I hope that I shall be forgiven for intervening. Parts of my constituency have been subject to the restricted zones and, in any event, the ancient kingdom of Essex used to stretch into Suffolk. I am therefore qualified to speak.

I shall not go down the route of discussing second homes, correspondence and breakfasts. I am sorry that I did not attend the breakfast this morning, as I am not certain what was announced about the revised compensation scheme. That shows the disadvantage of political meetings so early in the day. However, from what the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) said, I gather that the scheme may be along the lines of that advocated by the National Pig Association.

In many ways, this outbreak is more severe than what happened in 1986 because it comes on the back of probably the greatest depression in agriculture since the 1930s. It is the greatest depression that the pig-farming sector has faced within farming living memory and it is the one depression on top of the other that has made the crisis so acute in the eastern counties. Let us briefly consider the crisis that pig farming has suffered in the past two to three years. The price of pigmeat has fallen from the top price of 140p per kilo to way down below the perceived break-even figure of 90-odd pence per kilo.

The reasons why such a situation has come about are manifold. The ubiquitous argument about the strength of the pound comes into it, as does the argument about

the extra costs that the sector has borne with regard to the well-advanced and well-received welfare standards that our pig sector introduced way ahead of many of our competitors. There may have been a misjudgment on the back of the BSE crisis—in that more consumers would switch to pigmeat away from beef. That did not occur on the scale that was anticipated. In any event, owing to the strength of the pound we were not able to take advantage of contracting the Danish or Dutch shares of our domestic market. All those problems existed in any event and those of us who represent pig farming constituencies will know that the industry has been in severe crisis for some time.

The problem amounts to a tragedy of almost Shakespearian proportions. Classical swine fever came along at the very moment that the corner was being turned, when the price was rising and edging up towards £1 per kilo and when there was a streak of hope about what had been a bleak prospect. Pig farmers in my constituency understand that the industry has not been subsidised for many years for various historical reasons. I do not think that they want the industry to be subsidised. We are in a unique situation in that the industry has received a double blow, which requires a broader view to be taken of what might be possible. There was a real risk beyond what we are facing now—that confidence in the product would have been undermined. I was most grateful to learn from the various radio shows that I listen to while driving around my constituency that the disease poses no danger to humans. Fortunately, for once, there has been no irresponsible scaremongering. It has been accepted that the disease cannot threaten humans and, consequently, the price of pigmeat has remained steady and on an upward position, as it was throughout the summer.

I shall not go into the more polemical parts of the speech of the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk. That is for Opposition Members to do and for my right hon. Friend the Minister to resist. I certainly can say, however, that she has replied to my entreaties in correspondence within a relatively short time. I am a supporter of the scheme that has been advanced by the National Pig Association: that compensation should take the form of a headage payment. There should be a sliding scale based on the weight of the pig. I do not know the figures that were announced today, but £12 per head and 55p per kilo have been advanced. That seems an eminently sensible way in which to proceed.

As for the industry levies, they should be introduced in good times to provide an insurance fund for bad times. These are bad times in pig farming, and difficult times to collect such a levy. I understand the Ministry's trepidation that the fund may not yield what is predicted and that the £15 may not be paid. The Ministry may take a chance, if it is allowed to do so by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and advance the money on the basis that other matters will fall into place and the levy can be collected.

There is a case, however, for taking a longer term view about the possibility of a levy to be used as a fund against future outbreaks of swine fever or other diseases. One pig farmer in my area mentioned the outbreak of another disease some years ago. He asked me whether the levy that was made then had all been paid out. I have yet to ascertain the facts and ask my right hon. Friend the Minister of State to inquire further about it. A longer term levy at an appropriate rate, that could be adjusted in bad times and increased in good ones, may be an appropriate answer to the problem.

It does not help, during the current agricultural crisis, to make party political points. The problems for those involved in the industry are so severe that they will want to hear about the steps being taken that will benefit them now and in the long term. My right hon. Friend the Minister is sympathetic to the position in which the pig sector finds itself, so I hope to hear a positive and progressive response from her.

11.26 am

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) on securing the debate. As he says, the difficulties and problems suffered by the pig industry in our constituencies since the end of July have been compounded by the fact that we have been unable to get comments or facts from the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. This debate has provided us with our first opportunity to confront Ministers with the problems that our constituents have suffered since the end of July—for that, thanks be to Parliament.

I congratulate my hon. Friend also on the comprehensive way in which he covered not only the unfolding of a situation that brought many farmers in my constituency near to ruin, but the problems that remain. The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) added some pertinent points, which may not have referred precisely to Norfolk and Suffolk, but which showed that his heart is with us.

We are all pleased that the outbreak was contained. Local farmers, with whom I have been in constant touch since the end of July, appreciated the regular briefings that they received from vets and other officials. When the emergency operation centre at Bury St. Edmonds was set up, farmers found that they could approach it with some ease. Of course, we have not had such an outbreak for 14 years. We all—producers, the Opposition, Ministers and Ministry officials—hoped that there would be no need to introduce arrangements for dealing with this difficult notifiable disease. However, it is also true that the machine had to cranked up—vets had to be brought in not only from other areas but from other countries. One wonders what might have happened had there been an outbreak in Cornwall or Devon—thank goodness, there was not—that could not have been managed from the same operations centre at Bury St. Edmonds.

Dr. Gibson: Will the right hon. Lady consider being more positive about the action taken over the outbreak? The BSE crisis extended across the country, but the actions taken in this instance prevented an extremely infectious virus from spreading from Norfolk and Suffolk to other parts of the United Kingdom, so compliments are due. I remind hon. Members of Baroness Hayman's visit to pig producers, from whom she brought extremely positive answers back to the Ministry.

Mrs. Shephard: Obviously the hon. Gentleman did not listen to what I said, as he was preparing his question

[Mrs. Shephard]

instead. I had just said that we were all pleased that the outbreak was contained, and that farmers appreciated the briefings from officials and others.

Dr. Gibson: I missed that.

Mrs. Shephard: Yes. Such measures were appreciated, and I took the trouble to write to the Minister in the other place at the beginning of the outbreak to make the point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk painted a telling picture of the outbreak's devastating local effect on agriculture and the rural economy. I shall be brief, but I want to underline some of what he said. The financial effects of the outbreak must be set against a background in which, according to the *Eastern Daily Press* of 18 September, local farm incomes have fallen 50 per cent. since 1996. The figures are taken from a report by Larking Gowen, a Norwich-based firm of accountants, and it is pointed out that farmers in East Anglia currently earn less than the statutory minimum wage. That also underlines the point made by the hon. Member for Braintree, who said that the pig industry was hardly in a happy situation before the outbreak.

That figure—farm incomes falling by 50 per cent. in the past four years—was calculated before the financial effects of the swine fever outbreak or the Government's fuel tax policies had been taken into account. The Ministry will be aware that, before the outbreak, the pig industry was only starting to recover from its own crisis and survived thanks to the determination and good husbandry of producers involved. Although farmers certainly appreciated the co-operation and helpfulness of officials at the containment centre in Bury St. Edmunds, farmers themselves should be congratulated. They showed great responsibility by complying with requests made to them in containing the disease, despite the heavy financial effects that those requests imposed on them.

Owing to the regulations imposed by surveillance zones and movement restrictions, the impact on cash flow for farmers whose livestock has not suffered from the disease has been devastating. Neville Kemp, a constituent of mine from East Harling, expressed the problem at a farmers' meeting on 17 October, saying, as reported in the *Eastern Daily Press* of 21 October:

> When this outbreak happened some 10 weeks ago, no one could have anticipated the mayhem that this was going to cause. The whole thing has been a catalogue of disaster.
>
> We are three km from the original infected site. We've not had swine fever but have suffered from the consequences of it.
>
> Our cashflow stopped 10 weeks ago—and it has cost the business in the order of £25,000 a week because pigs could not be moved off and sold.

The report continues to explain:

> Pigs have been put into the welfare disposal scheme with over-finished pigs fetching £50 per head or a fraction of their value.
>
> Mr Kemp said that the impact of being forced to keep larger numbers of pigs on the farm resulted in much higher pig mortality.

There have been gross problems of animal welfare. Mr. Kemp said that pig mortality,

> went from five per cent overall to nearly 28 per cent at the peak when we were keeping pigs in barns where they shouldn't have been.
>
> All we could do was to keep piling these pigs up. I'm not alone. There are hundreds who are in the same situation.

Another farm in my constituency that has been adversely affected is the old, established farm Pilgrim's of Banham, which has calculated that its loss over the period amounts to £168,461. That is the most extraordinary loss to expect a company to bear and survive. It is a matter not only for pig producers but for the rural economy. The knock-on effects if such a company had to cease trading would be felt in employment and haulage, by suppliers and throughout the rural economy, which is already suffering because of fuel tax and other difficulties.

At the beginning of the outbreak, the Minister of State in the other place attended a meeting of producers, despite much reported hesitation. It has been difficult to hear by rumour that she has visited on other occasions and for us to be unable to meet her because her meetings with individual farmers have been reported only after the event.

Despite repeated invitations, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has been notable by his absence. He has apparently been unable to reply to letters from colleagues. I was interested to hear that the hon. Member for Braintree had received replies to his letters. Clearly he was wise to address them to the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin). The matter is not trivial, because we are trying to help producers and answer their questions. I was driven to tabling a parliamentary question as soon as the House returned to ask when I might receive a reply to my letter to the Minister of 31 August. I had one of those wonderful replies that told me that he would answer as soon as possible. Today, the day of the debate—what magic, the power of Parliament again—I received a letter from the Minister, although it took four days to arrive from Smith square, which must be something to do with the rain. It is of course dated after 31 August. It did not arrive until 1 November, but it is dated 27 October. A terrific mystery is involved. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk said, the Minister promised to visit on 28 September, but regrettably he has not done so. Earlier today he again promised to do so, and it will be welcome if he manages to fit a visit to that hard-pressed area into his equally hard-pressed diary.

Many unanswered questions remain. The Minister made an announcement at the Meat and Livestock Commission meeting this morning. I do not know whether he should have made it to Parliament, but had he done so we would have been able to question him on the content and the point of it. We shall not have the same opportunity today with the Minister of State, because her contribution comes at the end of the debate. However, I shall ask her some questions now that relate to the legislative arrangements necessary to bring into force the compensation package, which will include a levy from the industry.

I understand, and expect the Minister to confirm, that legislation will be necessary to bring into force the levy from the industry. When is that due to be considered and when will it come into force? Will the levy cover all notifiable diseases and any human-health related diseases, as producers have apparently been told? The eastern region chairman of the National Pig Association

has written to the Minister about that, but naturally has not received a reply. The right hon. Lady will be able to tell us this morning.

Does the agreement of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly have to be obtained? If so, is that likely to be forthcoming given that there has been no trace of the disease in those parts of Britain? Given the uncertainties of the timing and availability of the levy, do the banks accept it as a bankable proposition? Is it fair that pig farmers have to bail themselves out because, as they believe, a consignment of pork reached this country illegally from abroad and caused the disease? What responsibility do the Government take? The pig industry clearly needs answers and it needs them fast.

I hope that the Minister will be able to enlarge on the announcement made elsewhere this morning by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. As far as one can tell, there seems to have been some restructuring of the compensation arrangements but it was not clear whether additional money is to be provided for compensation and what the ceiling for compensation per animal is to be. It is welcome that the right hon. Gentleman has listened to concerns about the structuring of the compensation from the industry, but there are other questions. The Ministry will have to think about the implications of consequential losses that result from this kind of disease. The worst losses have been incurred by those whose herds have not had the disease. That is the point. The Ministry must take account of that. According to veterinary sources, climate change is likely to bring about more unusual and unexpected outbreaks of disease. The Ministry will have to come to grips with the question of consequential loss.

I am grateful finally to have had the chance to put these concerns directly to a Minister. The right hon. Lady will answer them conscientiously—that is her reputation and that is how she always responds. However, I cannot emphasise enough the disappointment and sense of let-down felt by pig producers because of the lack of ministerial response at a time when their livelihoods are tumbling down around their ears.

11.42 am

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): It is a great honour to follow two excellent speeches by my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) who have covered many of the issues that I wanted to raise this morning. We all know that the pig industry is a roller coaster. Prices go up and down from great extremes. The difference in the past three years has been that until very recently prices have been stuck at an incredibly low level. For about three years the pig industry has been on its uppers and unlike any other sector of agriculture in this country it receives no subsidies. The situation has been made worse for pig producers because they have to compete with imports that do not have to comply with the same high hygiene and welfare standards as our pigs. Our pig industry has not been supported by the degree of honesty in labelling that could have been expected.

The past three years have been extremely difficult. Farmers with mixed farms have had little joy in other parts of agriculture, with wheat at £55 a tonne and sugar beet down to £27 a tonne. There is great uncertainty about the future of the sugar regime, allied to the fact that the cost of fuel has been rising steeply. The cost of ammonium nitrates and other chemicals has meant that the farming industry has been going through a crisis and a depression the extent of which is unmatched, certainly in my lifetime, and probably not seen since the 1920s and 1930s. The fact that swine fever came on top of that was the last straw for many producers, so it has had a disproportionate effect.

The impact on individual families involved in the pig industry has largely been one of cash flow. Their sole source of income stopped. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk said, many pig farmers have received no money at all for some 10 weeks. A typical farm with about 300 sows receives a regular income of £10,000 and that income has just stopped. The problem has caused a great deal of hardship. Barclays bank estimates that the level of indebtedness of pig farmers in Norfolk and Suffolk increased by £2 million during August and September. The impact of the problem has been felt not only by the pig farmers, but by their suppliers, the feedstuff suppliers, other related industries and by the pigs themselves. Figures show that pig mortality in some herds has increased from 5 per cent. to nearly 30 per cent. The implications of dealing with that level of mortality are horrendous for the men involved.

What has been the Government's reaction to the problem? I have tried to get in touch with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food since the end of August, but I have not yet received a reply. My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk received a letter from him today, but I have received no communication at all. To me, as a Member of Parliament, that shows a lack of interest and understanding and it is absolutely disgraceful. What am I supposed to tell my constituents who work in the pig industry? Their livelihoods are severely compromised, but the Minister cannot even be bothered either to visit them or to reply to correspondence. It is a disgrace.

The Government will have to come up with a lot of answers about the handling of the dispute. Why is the testing for swine fever taking almost a month, when it could be done in 10 days? Why has it taken so long to kill the confirmed units? Why are there stories of dead pigs being left overnight with crows and foxes feeding on them, spreading disease?

Mrs. Shephard: Reports in my constituency have circulated about dead pigs being left in fields for far longer than overnight. Apparently, they have been left for four days, and carrion seekers have pecked at the bodies and carried the disease heaven knows where.

Mr. Prior: I have heard stories about dead pigs being left for more than 24 hours, but obviously four days is much worse than that. The story about the 24 hours happened in the Quidenham zone, where literally hundreds of pigs were left in a heap overnight. As my right hon. Friend said, they are a prey to carrion. One of the problems in Norfolk and Suffolk has been the great expansion in outdoor pigs over the past five to 10 years, partly in response to welfare regulations. It has made the containment of the disease that much more difficult.

[Mr. Prior]

The compensation package should have been designed to contain the disease as much as possible. It has clearly not done that. Had farmers been irresponsible, there would have been a tremendous incentive to contract the disease and claim full compensation or to shift pigs out of containment zones before they were announced by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. It is only because pig farmers have taken an incredibly responsible attitude to the problem that the containment and restriction zones have worked. There has been an incentive for farmers to keep pigs weighing more than 100 kg. That has resulted in the welfare problems that we have discussed and has cost the Government more. It would have been much better had farmers put smaller pigs into the scheme without suffering a financial penalty. Perhaps the Minister of State will say something about that when she replies to the debate because the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food may have changed the compensation rules.

Will the Minister of State explain what happened in Holland? When the same problem arose there, what compensation was made available to its pig farmers? I have been told that that the compensation programme was much more generous and, instead of simply including a profit element, compensated farmers for the full cost of production. It would have amounted to about £100 for a 100 kg pig.

The Government will need to answer many questions. They have been fortunate that the disease has not spread further because there is nothing in the compensation scheme to prevent that from happening. Many farmers feel bitter and upset that the Government have not been prepared even to visit them, let alone answer their questions, so I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

11.49 am

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) on raising this issue and on his miraculous timing. The debate is taking place only hours after the Minister's important statement at breakfast this morning.

I agree with many hon. Members that pig farmers are a special breed of people. I say that from one Breed to another. In recent years, they have complied with everything that has been thrust on them. They co-operated almost immediately with the stall and tether bans, investing huge sums of money to comply with them. They grappled with meat and bone meal feed and high abattoir charges, which were not their fault, but due to BSE.

Having ensured that their industry met welfare and health standards, pig farmers were subjected to perhaps the ultimate insult of seeing imported meat re-labelled as if it were British. A couple of weeks ago, we heard about a farmer from Honiton in Devon who was effectively acting as a trading standards officer, because he identified a product in Tesco as wrongly labelled. After complying so quickly and efficiently with everything that was asked of them after this outbreak of classical swine fever, pig farmers feel, not unnaturally, rather disappointed that the compensation and the way in which things have gone have not helped them much.

I welcome the Minister's announcement this morning that the Government have accepted the industry's compensation package. I suspect that there are many lessons to be learned from the Phillips report on BSE, but one is that compensation has a significant effect on the motivation and intention of farmers who receive it. Part of the problem with BSE was that the compensation package changed and did not compensate farmers fully. If the pig farmers had not responded so magnificently, this outbreak might have been more significant.

The compensation package lacks one final aspect, which shows the way in which the Ministry views BSE and classical swine fever. Almost everything has to do with timing, which in commercial terms manifests itself in cash flow. There is a relentless rise in borrowing from the bank, because of lack of income. That places various additional costs on top of interest and banking costs and the inability to pay bills. There is a knock-on effect throughout the sector.

Although a compensation package has been announced, people fear that it may not secure for the industry all the benefits that it should, mainly because of timing. An important element is the levy payment of 20 per cent. from the industry, which must be collected at a time when things are difficult, processed and paid out. That 20 per cent. may not be available for many months, yet the industry has major cash flow problems.

I hope that the Minister will respond positively to the idea of what in banking is called a bridging loan. Farmers could receive that portion of the compensation more quickly. The MLC could pay it out and repay the Treasury later when it has collected it. The securing of compensation payments will be a key element in the industry's continued success after this disastrous episode. However, there are lessons to be learned and, as we have found from the Phillips report, they are wide and many. I have a few questions in addition to those that other hon. Members have asked, many of which were on my lips too.

I want to raise the issue of pre-planning. We heard this morning that the pig industry had changed significantly since the previous swine fever outbreak. That is true. In a commercial context, "what-if" exercises can be carried out, to establish what would happen in certain circumstances. The Ministry should address itself to pre-planning for the relevant scenario, not least to ensure that with the new format of closed MAFF offices, other parts of the country will be equally well served if a similar outbreak occurs. Does the Ministry have a proper pre-planning exercise to ensure that swift action can be taken throughout the country?

Because the compensation package is new, a monitoring system will be necessary to ensure that all the appropriate needs are met and that the Ministry stays close to the situation. Many pig farmers are on the brink and they will be highly dependent on their business planning. They will need to ensure that compensation payments and their business plans in relation to the bank can be properly relied on and that the Ministry will provide the compensation package quickly.

The origin of the outbreak seems to have been in some imported infection. What closer scrutiny of imports is now being undertaken? What regulations are being tightened?

I have been thinking for some time, not least because of the problems of farming incomes generally and the way that prices have been driven down by supermarkets among other factors, that the value of mixed farming should be recognised. We seem to have departed from that. When farmers engaged in a variety of farming activities they were cushioned from the effects of a problem in one sector by their operations in another. We seem to have arrived at a stage of specialisation, be it in dairy, pigs or poultry, whereby farmers depend principally on one activity for their income. A problem in that sector affects them massively.

It is now being suggested that the industry should raise a levy or that other ways of providing compensation could be pursued. The greatest cushion for many businesses is the opportunity to derive income from a variety of sources, such as having customers in different places or engaging in different activities. There is certainly merit in examining the way in which over the years we have arrived at a way of farming so specialised that each sector is vulnerable.

Mrs. Shephard: I much appreciate the hon. Gentleman's thoughtful presentation. However, while undoubtedly over the years a steady concentration and specialisation of farming activities has taken place, at present every sector has taken a nose dive. The result is that even being in mixed farming—and many farmers are—is not much help.

Mr. Breed: That is also a thoughtful contribution, but in general terms it should be recognised that the stability of businesses depends on a wide customer and activity base. I hope that perhaps there will be some investigation of that line of thought, if only to eliminate it.

11.59 am

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) on obtaining the debate and the opportunity to question the Minister, and on the way in which he opened the debate. He clearly set out the state of affairs in the pig industry, in particular in Norfolk and Suffolk, although there are peripheral effects in Essex and, potentially, consequences for the rest of the country.

I am the only former pig farmer in the Chamber—and probably the only one in the House. My pig unit would have been in one of the restricted areas, so I come to the debate with some empathy for those who are so seriously caught up in the situation. As my hon. Friend said, the pig industry is not normally subsidised; however, it is not true that it has never been subsidised. At one time, it was subsidised to the tune of 50p a score—a now outdated measurement of pig weights. My hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that that occurred in the late 1970s, under the previous Labour Government, because of the state of the industry.

As several hon. Members have said, this outbreak of swine fever follows two and a half years of serious losses. About 26 per cent. of the breeding herd in England has gone and, as has been emphasised, farmers have no reserves on which to call to carry them through the new crisis. Although the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) chided my hon. Friends for being, as he put it, partisan over the issue, the music has for the moment stopped and we have these Ministers in charge of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. If there are criticisms of the way in which the situation has been handled, they should be made.

My right hon. and hon. Friends were justified in making an issue of the Minister's failure to visit the area—in such a crisis, one would have expected him to do so. There is evidence that farmers would prefer the organ grinder—I will not continue the analogy. The Minister told the meeting that was referred to earlier that he cancelled his holiday. That is a noble gesture, but not many farmers would believe that he had to sit in his office for the whole of August without being able to visit the area.

On 4 September, I wrote officially to the Minister on behalf of the Opposition and pointed out, among other issues, that the £66 million outgoers scheme announced by the Government at the end of March has still not been put in place and farmers have not received a penny of it. That potential cushion is still not available to farmers and probably will not be for several months. Hon. Members will not be surprised to learn that it took seven weeks for me to receive a reply, even to an official letter from the Opposition. The letter came from the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), but was signed by her private secretary. Unfortunately, it did not even mention the outgoers scheme and, what is worse, it was factually incorrect in its references to the proposals of the National Pig Association. I shall return to that issue.

My first question to the right hon. Lady has to be when she expects the outgoers scheme to begin to deliver to farmers, who are in desperate need of that small extra support. Furthermore, will farmers who have been slaughtered out because of the swine fever outbreak and who have decided not to restock because they do not wish to continue pig farming also be eligible for the outgoers scheme?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk said, around 170,000 pigs have so far been slaughtered under compulsory slaughtering and under the welfare scheme. Although the scheme is in the interests of welfare—I understand the reasons for that—the restriction orders create huge costs for the industry. Cash flow, to which the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) referred, is crucial. Farmers have no cash flow for extra feed, labour and housing costs.

David Hodgetts of Barclays bank was present at the meeting that my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) attended. As reported in *Farming News*, Mr. Hodgetts told my right hon. Friend:

> The average producer in restricted areas was losing up to £9,500 a week, and borrowings by East Anglian pig producers had risen by £2 million pounds.

Those are the words not of the politicians but of the bankers, which puts the matter into context. There is a temptation for farmers to hang on to their stock in the hope that restrictions can be lifted. That is not necessarily the best way forward, but it is a direct result of the fact that the compensation scheme was not properly structured.

The scheme on which the Government made an announcement this morning was submitted to them by the NPA almost a month ago. We may all question why

[Mr. James Paice]

it has taken the Government so long to reach a decision; perhaps the Minister preferred to announce it on a platform rather than address the urgency of the situation. However, the Government have now decided to ask the industry to fund a levy. In passing, I say to the hon. Member for Braintree that a levy was raised on an earlier occasion during an occurrence of Aujeszky's disease that caused serious problems for the industry. There is still money outstanding from that levy, which the Government have failed to make available.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) referred to the legal procedures needed to get the levy in place, which will be long and drawn out. Consultations are going on, and the industry has already requested that the Government provide a bridging loan. I believe that they have refused to do that, but I ask the Minister to reconsider that decision. We are talking about only £2 million, which will be recouped through the levy and will make a great deal of difference. After all, it represents 20 per cent. of the compensation that will be available, according to new figures.

On the administration of the welfare scheme, among the articles that have come out of various discussions and meetings taking place in East Anglia is one from *Farming News*, written by Mr. Brian Rivett of Fakenham, in Norfolk. The author lists a catalogue of what might be called administrative overkill, which I shall not detain hon. Members by detailing. He refers to the fact that people count the pigs out and in again and, if there are any errors, go back to square one. More people are supervising the killing than doing it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Norfolk, supported by my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk, mentioned pigs that are left around at risk of carrion feeders, which could then spread the disease. Has a Minister or a senior official gone to watch the procedures and seen what is happening? There can be no smoke without fire and, although—who knows—there may be some journalistic licence in those articles, there is almost certainly some truth behind them. I hope that the Government will respond to those matters.

I must refer, as others have, to the cause of the outbreak. From the letter placed in *The Veterinary Record* by Ministers' officials, it seems certain that it was caused when a pig in an outdoor unit ate an imported pork product. I believe that the unit has been identified. It is ironic that the supposedly more welfare friendly scheme in which pigs are kept outdoors may have been the cause of the infection, which has had such damaging consequences not only for farmers but for pig welfare. Clearly, pigs kept outdoors are more prone to scattered waste than those kept indoors.

The aspect of the letter placed by people from the State Veterinary Service in *The Veterinary Record* that most astonished me was the statement that the

most likely source of infection is thought to be an infected pork product. A review of legal imports has failed to reveal a potential source from the Far East. However illegal imports can occur and may include contaminated products.

That is clear and, unless there is more recent information, we assume that that is still the view of Ministry scientists and officials. I come now to the question of how that position can arise. There could be only two sources of that illegal product: either an individual brought in a pork pie or a sandwich that contained pigmeat from the far east or the pigmeat was imported in an unprocessed form and turned into a pork pie or sandwich filling. I believe that the latter case is the most likely.

For the past three years, the Opposition have been challenging the Government about the quality of our imports and the control of standards. When the Food Standards Bill was considered in Committee, I tabled an amendment to ensure that the Food Standards Agency had the same controls over imports as it had over domestically produced food. At the time, the right hon. Lady's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker) said that the Food Standards Agency

will have all the powers that we now have for checking what is coming into the country.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 15 July 1999; c. 334.]

Well, if the agency has such powers, they are not being applied satisfactorily. If the very serious outbreak of the disease in East Anglia was by illegally imported foodstuffs, what else is being imported illegally into this country that might have even more serious and far-reaching consequences for animal or human health? I hope that the right hon. Lady will now do as some of my hon. Friends have suggested and tell us what the Government are doing to improve dramatically the quality of control over imported food. We cannot continue to have such problems.

The catalogue of delay and indecision by the Government has made matters worse. There has been little criticism of how the control of the disease has been managed by the officials of the State Veterinary Service and others, but there is plenty of evidence to show that the decision-making process and the delays have caused more serious consequences for pig producers than would otherwise have been the case.

The hon. Member for South-East Cornwall referred to the Phillips report, which cost £32 million. One of the clear lessons that has been learned from the report is that one has to make timely decisions and make them urgently on the best advice that is available at the time. The record of the past three months has not shown that the Government have learnt from the report. Ministry vets have taken admirable action, but there has been woeful inactivity by Ministers. Although the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food parrots his concerns, and did so again this morning, in his understanding and warm, emollient style, he and the Government will be judged on the way in which they have delivered results to the farmers.

My right hon. and hon. Friends have posed some questions this morning and I have added to them. The Minister of State now has a certain amount of time to answer them. They have not been made up by us; they are being asked by pig producers throughout East Anglia, who are suffering seriously from the outbreak. I hope that the right hon. Lady will now seek to redeem the Minister in the eyes of the farmers and produce some results so that they can begin to see a way forward.

12.13 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): We have had an important debate this morning and I shall try to respond

to as many of the points that have been raised as I possibly can. I completely understand the concern and the depth of feeling that right hon. and hon. Members have expressed about the plight of the pig industry in their constituencies. I do not accept some of the comments that were made about ministerial approaches to the situation, which I shall outline shortly. Nor do I accept the charge that procedures have been slow, chaotic or confused. That is not the case, but I recognise the depth of concern expressed by right hon. and hon. Members about the problem. After two difficult years faced by the pig industry, the situation has rightly been described as serious and tragic.

First, I shall explain the nature of classical swine fever. Secondly, I shall summarise the steps taken by the Ministry to control and eradicate the outbreak in East Anglia. Thirdly, I shall deal with pig welfare issues and the steps adopted by the Government to help farmers to cope with them. In addressing those three elements, I shall endeavour to respond to issues raised by the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) and other hon. Members from all political parties.

As hon. Members know, classical swine fever is a highly infectious and contagious viral disease, which can result in very high mortality rates. It occurs worldwide, but until this year there has been no outbreak in this country since 1986. Several hon. Members mentioned the 1986 outbreak this morning.

The disease cannot spread to humans—well known to hon. Members, but an important message for the wider public who may be following the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) mentioned attempts by radio broadcasters and others to disseminate that crucial public safety information. The Food Standards Agency has advised that classical swine fever poses no risk to consumers.

Procedures for controlling classical swine fever are set out in European Union legislation. All pigs on holdings where the disease is evident must be killed and destroyed. The carcases of all slaughtered pigs in East Anglia have been destroyed by rendering. Movement controls must be imposed within a minimum of a 10 km radius of each infected holding to prevent the spread of the disease. Hon. Members have understandably pointed out the contrast between farmers whose holdings are infected and those whose holdings are subject to the restrictions arising from the surveillance and wider measures in the area. I shall endeavour to deal with both elements in my response.

The source of the infection must be investigated and, where possible, identified. The extent of the spread must also be established. Controls cannot be lifted until the competent authority is satisfied that infection is no longer present in the zone. Let me assure the House that in dealing with the present outbreak, we have scrupulously followed European Union rules.

The current outbreak started on 8 August with a confirmed case of classical swine fever on a holding in Suffolk. All pigs on the holding were slaughtered, and pig movements to and from the holding were traced. These tracings led to a number of other confirmed cases and to further movement restrictions.

Various comments were made about the source of the infection. Investigations suggest that the original infection was introduced in early June to a breeding unit in Norfolk. Infection then appears to have spread to four pig-rearing premises through the movement of infected weaned pigs. Lateral spread appears to have taken place from one of these to two neighbouring holdings. Others were infected either by the movement of infected pigs or by the movement of vehicles or people.

The first priority of the State Veterinary Service, and of Ministers, has been and remains to eradicate the disease. Protection zones of 3km were placed around all infected premises, within which initially any movement of livestock was prohibited. Wider zones have also been established, within which all farms with pigs are inspected and kept under surveillance. In total, classical swine fever has been confirmed on 15 premises during the outbreak: one in Essex, six in Suffolk and eight in Norfolk. Nearly 60,000 pigs have been slaughtered as infected or as dangerous contacts. The Essex outbreak has been dealt with and the surveillance zone around that outbreak was lifted on 22 September, as my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree recognised.

I am also glad to say that the zone around one of the Norfolk outbreaks, the breeding unit where the infection is thought to have originated, was lifted on 28 October. It is encouraging that there have been no new cases of classical swine fever since 4 October. Provided that we see no more, the State Veterinary Service hopes to lift the remaining zones by the end of November. One thing that unites us all here is our keenness to see that timetable implemented if at all possible.

Throughout the outbreak, veterinary investigations have been made more difficult by the fact that, in its early stages, classical swine fever looks similar to another pig disease known as PDNS—porcine dermatitis and nephropathy syndrome. The State Veterinary Service has, therefore, had to adopt a very cautious approach to ensure that PDNS was not masking swine fever before releasing holdings from restrictions.

So far, investigations have been unable to identify the precise origin of the virus that caused the present swine fever outbreak. Using molecular techniques the Veterinary Laboratories Agency at Weybridge has precisely typed the strain of swine fever virus responsible for all the confirmed cases in East Anglia. It is not the same strain as caused the much larger outbreak in the Netherlands in 1997. It may be of Asian origin, and may therefore be linked to imported meat products, but at the moment the exact route of its introduction remains uncertain.

Throughout the course of the outbreak, Ministers, the Chief Veterinary Officer and MAFF officials have been kept in close touch with representatives of the pig and meat industries and all other interested parties. My right hon. Friend the Minister met pig industry representatives on several occasions in August in the early stages of the outbreak. My noble Friend Baroness Hayman visited the area on four occasions to meet pig farmers and see the problems for herself. As she is the Minister with responsibility for animal health it was entirely appropriate for her to fulfil that role.

Officers of the State Veterinary Service, including the Chief Veterinary Officer, have also attended many local meetings of pig farmers in East Anglia to keep them

[Ms Joyce Quin]

informed of progress. Indeed the Chief Veterinary Officer was in Diss two days ago when he made the important announcement about the timetable that we hoped to implement for the remaining areas. That was welcomed by the industry in East Anglia. Indeed, contacts have been invaluable in ensuring that Government and industry have worked together to eradicate the disease. I should like to join with other hon. Members who have paid tribute, as the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) did, to the work of the State Veterinary Service and veterinary officials. Other hon. Members pointed out the responsible attitude of pig farmers in the areas concerned. I concur with those remarks and am happy to endorse them.

We have also put in place a helpline for farmers, and information is provided by Ceefax and on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. We have made great efforts to keep farmers as informed as possible, to help them through the difficulties caused by the outbreak.

Several hon. Members referred to animal welfare and related problems. I accept the fact that existing regulations provide more compensation for those on infected premises than those caught in the surveillance zones. For that reason, in learning lessons from the outbreak, it is important to do what we can to set up a long-term system so that the discrepancy does not recur. Previous Governments have not attempted such a system, but I hope that we can try to find a long-term solution. The hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk talked about the importance of short-term measures, and of the longer term. I agree. We have taken effective short-term measures, but the Government and the industry are keen to tackle the long-term issue together. I hope to talk about that shortly.

Obviously, the movement restrictions that had to be introduced to control the outbreak of swine fever pose severe economic problems for the farms affected. When animals cannot be sold or moved from premises as planned, accommodation or space needs to be found for an increasing volume of them. Careful management of farms is needed to avoid overstocking and the consequent increased risks of poor welfare and disease.

On 29 August, the Government introduced the pig welfare disposal scheme to deal with the potential welfare problems, in recognition of the exceptional circumstances affecting pig producers because of the movement restrictions required to eradicate the outbreak of swine fever. The measures are important. Several hon. Members referred to the outbreak of classical swine fever in 1986, in which there were 10 confirmed cases, but no compensation was paid other than that for pigs slaughtered. There was no animal welfare scheme of the kind that the Government have introduced.

We also introduced the scheme reasonably quickly. The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire understandably referred to some of the frustrations involved in achieving European clearance for the pig industry restructuring scheme. Part of our motivation for bringing in the animal welfare disposal scheme was that we could get it up and running quickly. It was therefore frustrating for me to be charged with "chaos, slowness and delay" when we wanted to work with the industry to give some relief and support to farmers whose premises were not infected, but who were caught up in the wider surveillance measures.

As of the end of October, 134,000 pigs had been offered to the scheme and claims worth £4.1 million had been submitted for payment. That money is substantially in excess of that paid out in the 1986 outbreak.

Mr. Keith Simpson: Obviously, because of the time restrictions, the Minister will be unable to answer all the many questions asked. Will she assure us that her officials will answer those questions as soon as possible, so that we can pass the answers to our constituents?

Ms Quin: I am more than happy to give that assurance. When I saw that I had 15 minutes in which to reply, I knew that I would not be able to deal with every question. In no sense do I want to try to avoid them; we have good answers to them.

I was taken to task about correspondence. I am fairly certain that I remember signing a letter to the hon. Gentleman who raised the issue. However, if having read that reply he wants to pursue further issues with me, he can do so.

I hope that the modification to the scheme that my right hon. Friend the Minister announced at the Meat and Livestock Commission breakfast this morning will be welcome. It has been worked out with the industry. It is not a change of policy or a new scheme but a modification to the rate of the existing scheme, which was why my right hon. Friend the Minister felt that he could tell the industry this morning. It was not the sort of statement that it would, as hon. Members said, have been necessary to present to Parliament. It is simply a modification of an existing scheme.

As promised, I shall endeavour to write to hon. Members about outstanding issues raised and I shall place copies in the Library. The Government have acted speedily to help farmers who have infected premises and who are outside the immediate infected area to ensure that the problem is tackled as speedily and effectively as possible.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. Time is up.

HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse

12.30 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): On 10 December 1941, one of the Royal Navy's newest battleships, HMS Prince of Wales, and the battlecruiser HMS Repulse were sunk by Japanese torpedo bombers off the coast of Malaya. The loss of life was substantial: some 840 men perished. It was one of the critical naval actions of the 20th century, presaging the final dissolution of the British empire and ending European supremacy in the far east.

The attack took place within 72 hours of the attack on Pearl harbour, and it meant that the British and United States' maritime supremacy in the western Pacific was destroyed virtually at a stroke. Its effect on the morale of those defending Malaya and Singapore was devastating. If ever it could be said that a naval defeat had substantial consequences, this was surely the one.

In some ways, it all seems a long time ago. I am over the age of 50, and I did not fight in the war; I was not even born then. Equally, it would be common ground between us all here, including myself and the Minister, that the fact that we are here having this debate is due directly to the sacrifice of people such as those 840 men.

Although it is a long time ago to us, for some people the loss is every bit as poignant today as it was at the time, and it was thought that the site would be a final resting place for the men who died there. Such people include Shirley Ward, a senior staff reporter on the *Mid-Devon Advertiser* in Newton Abbot. Her father was Lt Horace Ward, the ordnance officer on HMS Repulse. His death was not the first tragic incident for the Ward family. Her uncle, Warrant Officer Roy Ward, had died when HMS Courageous was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland in the first days of the second world war. For some people, those memories remain fresh. Those who lost relatives, husbands, uncles, brothers or sons would have expected and hoped that the wrecks would remain the final and undisturbed resting place of their relatives and friends.

Sadly, it was not to be. Time will not allow me to describe the various depredations and spoliations that have taken place on the sites, but I can give a suggestion of them. There is substantial evidence of not simply minor pilfering of personal mementoes, but serious commercial plundering. I understand that some 8 tonnes of the port-side propellers of HMS Repulse have already been removed commercially, and some press reports, which I cannot verify today, suggest that the propellers on both sides may have been taken. There is no doubt that numerous personal belongings have also been lifted.

One of those who has campaigned hard on the issue, and I pay tribute to him for doing so, is Lord Clifford of Chudleigh, whose father was instrumental in having such sites designated war graves in the 1970s. I am indebted to Lord Clifford's briefing, which drew to my attention that Japan, a defeated and beaten nation, took steps immediately after the war to recover the bodies from the wrecks of their ships. That says something about how Japan regarded the sites. My attention has been drawn to a publication by an organisation called Scapa Flow Technical and John's Charters which shows that the MV Karin is available for dives on HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales. It states that the ships lie in shallow waters and an article written by one of the divers states:

> On one of the excursions aft we see sinks in cabins as we look through the portholes, left open for escape now fallen in to the ship as the hinges pull clear, signs of human occupation with cups, etc. and a toilet. I feel that we are the first to see these things since that day in 1941.

The article continues:

> The torpedo responsible ripped open a hole of about 8 m by 5 m. The sailors inside would have perished immediately. these places are now only patrolled by the fish.

The Press Association reported the comments of a survivor, Albert Burnell, about the spoliation of these wrecks. He said:

> I loved my ship and still do. We lost a lot of brave men and they should be honoured and respected...You wouldn't have people taking handles off coffins, would you? Why is this any different?

It is not any different; indeed, it is worse. Some of the things that have been taken away amount not to taking the handles off coffins but to opening them and stripping the rings off fingers. That is the enormity of the matter that we are discussing, which Lord Clifford raised in the House of Lords as long ago as 1995. Campaigners on the issue are now calling for the sites to be designated and protected.

I am delighted that the Minister is present and I am grateful to him to for writing to me on the matter. He stated in his letter:

> A request from HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse Survivors Associations to have both vessels designated under the provisions of the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986 is under consideration. Once this review has been completed and I have had the opportunity to consider the findings of the report, my officials will reply to the Survivors Association.

I hope that the Minister will not take it amiss if I say that that may be a fine starting point, but as a final position it will not do; more will be required. I want from the Minister a commitment to act and, because I believe in bringing solutions as well as problems to the House, I will suggest ways in which that might be done.

I understand those who campaign on the issue who believe that the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986 may be the way forward, but I am not so sure about that, for reasons that I shall explain. I pay tribute to Professor Nicholas Gaskell of the Institute of Maritime Law at Southampton university, the leading institution on the subject in the United Kingdom. Professor Gaskell has advised the Government on similar issues.

Professor Gaskell said that the 1986 Act, useful as it is, does not do any more than protect those wrecks within United Kingdom waters that might be at risk from United Kingdom citizens or from boats registered here. Registration under that Act has its place, but it is not sufficient. Professor Gaskell told me that the Merchant Shipping and Maritime Security Act 1977—especially sections 24(1) and 24(2)(b)—is more use. Section 24(1) states:

> The Secretary of State may by order made by statutory instrument make such provision as he considers appropriate for the purpose of giving effect to any international agreement which relates to the protection of wrecks outside United Kingdom waters.

I understand from Professor Gaskell that if an international agreement were reached, it could be given force under the 1997 Act.

[Mr. Patrick Nicholls]

There is a third possible approach, for which I am again indebted to Professor Gaskell. He tells me that schedule 11 to the Merchant Shipping Act 1995 gives effect in United Kingdom law to an international convention. The relevant provision is article 19 of the salvage convention.

All the relevant law is fearfully complicated, but I understand from Professor Gaskell that article 19 would be relevant if Her Majesty's Government had reason to believe that nationals of a particular country were involved in pillaging sites. Those remain Crown property, wherever the sinking took place—subject to one proviso that I do not think I need to mention in a debate of this length. It is possible to implement the article, provided that steps have been taken in the relevant country, by way of an advertisement or article in the press or some such method, to draw to general attention the fact that the sites remain under the protection of Her Majesty's Government. Once that is done it is possible, under the convention, to sue or prosecute in the local courts. Again, Professor Gaskell tells me that there is no reason to suspect that Singapore would not be prepared to co-operate in that way. Singapore is relevant because many of the divers who visit the sites do so from there.

I have tried briefly to outline areas of law, which, although they are spectacularly complicated, suggest that, provided that the Minister can state a commitment to act, there is a way forward. Professor Gaskell, who is already in contact with the Government on related issues, assures me that if they want to speak to him about what I have described, he will be delighted to help.

This is the first occasion in recent times that this matter has been debated in the House of Commons, although Lord Clifford raised it several years ago in the House of Lords. It is an all-party matter. Labour, Liberal and Conservative Members have expressed concern about it. The hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) raised it at business questions, but this is the first time that we have had the opportunity for even a short debate on the matter. It is almost a matter of concern to all nations. Lord Clifford wrote to *The Daily Telegraph* on 10 October about the Scharnhorst, a German battleship that went down with the loss of nearly 2,000 people. He wrote as eloquently as he always does, and concluded:

> The grave should be treated just like a cemetery where, out of respect, visitors keep to the footpath. Divers should keep their distance, so that the place of rest may be honoured by family and friends.

A commitment from the Minister is needed to make progress with this matter. There will be talk—indeed, there has been talk already, I believe—of setting up yet more all-party groups, which will campaign over the years to bring about a successful conclusion. I bear in mind that the Minister, as far as he was able, and with his usual skill, hinted pretty broadly yesterday in this Chamber that an announcement may well be made shortly to bring to an end a campaign that many of us have been waging on behalf of former Japanese prisoners of war. By a happy coincidence, that may yet be achieved in time for Remembrance day. If the Minister were to give a commitment today on the matter that I have raised, it could be dealt with by Remembrance day next year.

The poet Rupert Brooke wrote about another war, which was called a war to end all wars:

> If I should die, think only this of me:
>
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
>
> That is for ever England.

For a great many of our constituents, what I have described is the nearest that they will get to that foreign field. What is needed from the Minister is not simply an assurance that he is reviewing and considering what might be done, but a direct commitment to the idea that what is happening to the graves in question is unacceptable. We need to know what steps have been taken or, if the process is to start today, that the Minister will write to the Governments in question and use the available law. He could go one better if he wanted to, and announce that the matter will all be dealt with by next Sunday. However, I stress in as friendly a way as I can that I should be appalled if I had to stand here again next year and learn that the same things were happening as are happening now. If the Minister will give a commitment to act, there is every reason to think that the law, complicated though it is, can be used.

12.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): I congratulate the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) on securing this debate on the important subject of protecting the sites of HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse. That is an important matter and an example of the interest shown in the subject of the protection of wrecked military vessels that are the last resting place of ships' companies.

I acknowledge that the matter is of increasing concern to a number of groups and individuals. I pay tribute to the efforts of various survivors' associations, the Friends of War Memorials and others who campaign tirelessly to bring the issue to the notice of Departments and Government agencies, local authorities and others—such as police forces, port and harbour authorities, museums and academic and professional bodies—which have a responsibility for or an interest in the conduct of diving and the protection of wrecks.

I pay tribute to Lord Clifford and others who have written to my colleague Baroness Symons and me about protecting HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse. I shall deal with the protection of wrecks generally, before dealing with specifics. I disagree with nothing that the hon. Gentleman has said. If he wants a commitment that I shall do everything in my power to take things forward, I am happy to give it. I cannot say whether I shall be successful. If he provides me with details of Professor Gaskell's advice and location, I shall be happy to get in touch with him.

We have heard how HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse were lost on 10 December 1941, following strikes by Japanese torpedo bombers. Repulse and Prince of Wales sank with the loss of 513 and 327 lives respectively. The wrecks of those vessels lie in international waters off the east coast of Malaysia. As the 60th anniversary of that sad loss approaches, I am glad to note in passing that the Royal Navy was able to conduct a service of remembrance at the wreck site and HMS Newcastle laid a wreath in commemoration on 31 July.

I state unequivocally that the Government share the widely held view that war graves should remain undisturbed and protected so far as that is practical and that diving on any other wreck should be unobtrusive. I would find it abhorrent if human remains in war graves were disturbed, unless there were overriding imperatives of marine or environmental safety. I am certain that the vast majority of people feel likewise.

The sport of recreational diving has recently enjoyed a significant growth in popularity. Technological advances in the equipment and navigational aids used by modern sports divers allow them to dive on sites to a greater depth and with greater precision than before. I have little doubt that the vast majority of sports divers are decent law-abiding people, who would wish to associate themselves with the remarks made by the hon. Gentleman about the protection of wrecks.

I pay tribute to the diving associations and the responsible and positive action that they are taking to educate their members about wreck protection. The three major associations have this year developed and launched a code of practice for their sports diver membership, which gives clear guidance about the need to respect and not to intrude on wreck sites. We welcome and encourage that initiative. I wish the code of practice every success, because, in the short term at least, a regime of informed self-regulation deserves to succeed. My officials and those in other Departments have supported that enterprise and will continue to do so.

It is imperative that the diving community and survivors' associations work together to ensure that due respect is paid to wreck sites and that they are not pillaged. Legislation alone is not the solution, although it can help. Respect through education is the best form of protection, certainly in the first instance, backed by legislation and the clear indication that action will be taken if necessary.

In a similar vein, I welcome the proposal by the Marine and Coastguard Agency to promote a wreck amnesty. Legislation provides that any wreck recovered from UK territorial waters, or brought within them, must be reported to the receiver, who is an official of that agency. The amnesty will encourage finders of wrecked material and artefacts who were perhaps ignorant of the law to come forward and report past finds. It should also allow the receiver of wreck to clarify the correct procedures to finders, and to encourage future compliance with the procedures.

Today, I have been specifically asked about the prospect of protecting the site of HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse, given the provisions of the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986. By implication, I have also been asked what legal and other actions the Government can and should take to discourage or prohibit intrusive diving on wrecked military vessels by a wayward or unscrupulous minority that does not heed the good sense of the diving associations' code of practice.

The 1986 Act empowers my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to designate by statutory instrument that the Act apply to any vessel that has sunk or been stranded while in military service, irrespective of whether its location is known. A place containing the remains of such a vessel, provided it is in United Kingdom waters or international waters, becomes a protected place. He is further empowered to designate as a controlled site any area, whether in UK or international waters, that appears to him to contain the remains of a vessel that sunk or was stranded in military service.

In broad terms, the Act makes it an offence to interfere with the remains of vessels within a protected place or controlled site, unless a licence permitting the interference has been issued by the Secretary of State for Defence. Thus, most intrusive diving activity on a designated vessel or wreck site will be prohibited unless a licence allowing diving to take place has been issued.

To date, the Ministry of Defence has not designated any vessels or controlled sites. I readily acknowledge that the situation regarding wrecks is changing, and have already mentioned how advances in the technology available to salvage and sub-aqua divers, coupled with a sustained increase in the popularity of diving as a sport, have meant that previously undisturbed wrecks may become potential targets for trophy hunters. This, together with the increased public respect for wrecks that are war graves, provided the impetus for a review of policy on the subject. I recognise the growing importance of the matter. Previously, I have said that my Department is reviewing the protection of vessels and wreck sites, and that I will respond fully to inquiries that I have received.

In considering the designation of vessels or wreck sites, I have given due consideration to the views of those campaigning for the designation of war graves. I have noted the coastal industry that revolves around sports diving, in which a small but significant number of individuals rely on diving for their livelihood in areas where options for alternative employment are limited. I am also conscious of the efforts that are being made by the diving associations to increase sports divers' awareness of the need to respect all those who lost their lives at sea. My Department intends to increase its support for those initiatives, through further information and guidance of its own.

I am not persuaded that that should be the Department's sole approach, however. I view the issue as a conflict of interest between aspects of the diving community and the interests of survivors' associations. I believe that education is the most effective mechanism by which wreck sites can be offered the best protection, but it may not be sufficient. In the balance of conflicting interests, we must always err on the side of the survivors' associations.

Mr. Nicholls: What the Minister says is most encouraging. Does he agree that much of it relates to good practice and enforceability in the UK's immediate sphere of influence? I have also drawn his attention to the fact that out and out commercial pillaging is taking place overseas. Would he be prepared to make representations to foreign Governments on such matters to ask for their co-operation, once he was satisfied that the law enabled him to do so?

Dr. Moonie: That is certainly what I have in mind. I shall make some remarks about the international situation shortly.

Moral authority rests with the rights of survivors rather than divers' recreational pursuits. It is for that reason that I have asked my Department to consider

[Dr. Moonie]

further the specific implications that designation of sites—either as protected places or as controlled sites—will have for the diving community from both a legal and economic perspective.

Additionally, I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that all wrecks of Her Majesty's ships, be they war graves or not, remain the property of the Crown. If we are able to gather evidence that individuals have been involved in pillaging of such vessels, it will be presented to the police for them to consider what action may be taken. I recognise that there is a need to take a tougher stance with the rogue element of the diving community. I ask all responsible elements of the diving community to pull together to stamp out the rogue elements and enable protection of Crown property to become a tangible reality. That area will always be difficult, and I believe that survivors' associations understand that, but platitudes are not sufficient when property is stolen or graves are desecrated.

HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse lie in international waters off the coast of Malaysia. Representations have been made by my officials both in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore to officials within the respective Governments. The navies of both Malaysia and Singapore have been asked to keep my officials informed of reports of intrusive diving or salvage or any untoward activities in the area of the wrecks.

Diving on those wrecks is likely to attract sports divers of many nationalities as well as local divers from Malaysia and Singapore. The 1986 Act does not extend to foreign nationals on non-British controlled vessels, and enforcing it at such a distance from home waters would present significant practical difficulties for all concerned, as the hon. Gentleman recognised in his remarks. It is unlikely to provide the degree of protection for HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales that the hon. Gentleman seeks. However, I believe that designation will provide evidence of the wrecks' status and the Government's commitment to honour its war dead. It is for that reason, therefore, that I have requested my officials to look again at detailing what designation will entail and what it will provide, and whether that can be linked effectively to ensure better protection.

My officials, together with those from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are working with the international community on how wrecks may best be protected. Several countries support our position that historical wrecked vessels and military war graves should be left undisturbed. UNESCO is discussing a draft convention on the protection of under-water cultural heritage. The United Kingdom and other major maritime powers are fully engaged in this process, particularly as it relates to historic warships. However, the hon. Gentleman must be aware that the process of working through UNESCO can be time consuming.

The Government share the desire, expressed today, that, where practicable, significant wrecks, whether civil or military, which are part of our heritage or are dangerous, should be properly protected. The issue goes beyond defence, and we need to take account of the rights and freedoms of the legitimate users of our territorial waters as well as peoples' aspirations for the protection of wrecks. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be reassured by my words today that the Government take the matter seriously. To that end, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for initiating this worthwhile debate.

I repeat the hope that I expressed earlier that the diving associations' efforts at self-regulation and, in particular, the recent code of practice, will bring about the improved behaviour that we all desire. If self-regulation proves inadequate, I remain ready to take further action to ensure that proper respect is paid to those sites in perpetuity. Some may be disappointed that I have failed to announce any concrete proposals today. They should not be disappointed, however, as more consideration is required. All my experience tells me that it is best to move forward slowly and, where possible, with the agreement of all parties concerned in such delicate areas. Consequently, before I make an announcement of the best way ahead, I propose to consult the relevant parties and shall do so as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, I hope that the tenor of my approach is clear. My Department supports the aspirations of survivors' associations and of the hon. Gentleman. In my opinion, time is up for rogue divers.

Biwater Industries (Clay Cross) Ltd.

12.59 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): On 4 September, a bombshell exploded at Clay Cross in my constituency. Within minutes of the takeover of Biwater, a pipe-manufacturing plant, it was announced that the works would be closed down at the beginning of December—only a month from now. That would lead to the loss of 700 jobs, and, since 75 per cent. of those workers live within a 5-mile radius of the plant, that would cause devastation to the local community.

The response was immediate. Everyone combined to fight the threatened closure: the workers, the General, Municipal and Boilermakers' union, local councils, elected representatives and the whole of the local community, including a highly active women's support group. The reaction was so strong because everyone knew that this plant was not on its last legs. It was to be closed not because it was doing badly, but because it was doing rather well.

According to Biwater's annual report this year, the company's share of the home market grew by 9 per cent. Its major strength, however, is in the export trade, and the report stressed that there had been a 30 per cent. increase in sales in Italy, and significant contracts with the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Vietnam, Korea, China and South Africa. The company's market position was being maintained in France, Spain and Germany. A breakthrough had been made into the Egyptian market, and the dominant market position was being maintained in Lebanon.

The only problem had been initial low oil prices in the middle east. When the price of oil rose, so did Biwater's orders. Indeed, with the recent hike in oil prices, orders have been flooding in. I have supplied details of these to the Department of Trade and Industry. Between 1 September and 25 September, £3.4 million-worth of orders came in, mainly after the announcement of the closure. On 16 October, I faxed to the Secretary of State 25 pages of further evidence of continuing export orders. In fact, the workers at Clay Cross have been working overtime and extra shifts in order to meet growing demand. Orders stood at £7.5 million at the end of August and rose to £9.13 million by the end of September.

Another sign that demand has been high for the pipes is that the value of stocks of goods for resale fell from £5.5 million in 1999 to £4.7 million in 2000. Biwater was not, therefore, producing goods that could not be shifted. Operating profits also rose from £2 million to £2.3 million in the same period.

Why on earth, therefore, would anyone wish to close down a plant that is the jewel in the crown of the United Kingdom's pipe-manufacturing industry? Let us look at who is up to what. Saint-Gobain is the company that took over Biwater. It operates through a British subsidiary, Stanton plc. Saint-Gobain is a highly profitable, powerful multinational company. From its headquarters in Paris, it controls 600 subsidiaries in 42 nations, and 8 per cent. of its massive empire is in pipe production.

Saint-Gobain's interests in Biwater have been, first, to destroy the pipe-manufacturing capacity of a rival company that has strength in overseas markets; secondly, to take over Biwater's substantial order books, resulting in much of the work ending up with Saint-Gobain's other operations in Brazil, China, Spain, France and Germany; and, thirdly, to transfer some of the plant to Stanton's works at Ilkeston, but mainly to asset-strip the provisions.

That Saint-Gobain has such selfish interests is illustrated by the nature of its deal in taking over Biwater. It has purchased the machinery, the order books, the know-how and the work force. It will take what it needs and place the rest on the scrap heap. It has leased the land and buildings from Biwater on a short-term basis only. In commercial terms, it considers that it needs to get off the site as quickly as possible.

I have had no time to mention the role of Adrian White, BBC governor and the effective owner of Biwater, so it will need to be spotlighted in future. It should also be noted that, even though it has recently received state aid in France, Saint-Gobain is not short of a bob or two. With 600 subsidiaries in 42 nations, its stock market value has increased threefold since 1988. In 1999, its gross profits amounted to 34.1 per cent. of sales, and its dividends amounted to 8 per cent. of sales, so it has ample cash for wheeler-dealing. It will benefit from the Clay Cross closure, but no one in this country will benefit.

Before I ask the Department of Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State to take specific action, I shall mention what has happened so far. On 22 September, the Secretary of State met a deputation from Clay Cross, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner). The Secretary of State faxed Jean-Louis Beffa, the chairman and chief executive of Saint-Gobain, asking him to reconsider the decision to close on the basis of arguments from the deputation, which he conveyed to Mr. Beffa. In his letter, the Secretary of State added:

> On behalf of the UK Government, I can assure you that we stand ready to provide assistance to keep the factory open.

When Mr. Beffa rejected those arguments, the Secretary of State rang him to try to persuade him to change his mind, but the arguments were again rejected. On 28 September, the Secretary of State made the following point at the Labour party conference:

> When there is real pressure and difficulties in areas like textiles, coal and steel and in specific plants like Biwater in Clay Cross...we must not stand to one side. We won't walk away.

It should be added that the pressures in textiles, coal and steel are relevant to the area in which Clay Cross is situated.

The situation is desperate. We are within a month of closure, and the loss of 150 jobs is earmarked for 17 November. In the light of his past commitments, what can the Secretary of State do? Under the Fair Trading Act 1973, the Secretary of State may immediately refer the takeover to the Competition Commission. Pending completion of the commission's investigation, the Secretary of State can prevent closure and establish that the plant is running fully, as prior to the takeover. Before deciding whether to do so, the Secretary of State will take into account the points made in this debate and representations from the EU Competition Commissioner. Commissioner Monti is considering whether, under EU directives and regulations, Saint-Gobain has abused its dominant

[Mr. Harry Barnes]

market position and whether abuse or misuse has occurred in respect of state aids agreed by the EU Commission and paid by the French Government.

Phillip Whitehead MEP and shop stewards met representatives from Commissioner Monti's office in order to pursue those points. He is trying to obtain relevant material from the European Union, and I believe that the DTI itself has made representations to try to clarify that point.

We should be on a winner with this argument: we should be able to save the plant. However, there is a big fly in the ointment—the Office of Fair Trading. In April, the OFT looked into the intended takeover. Its recommendation to the Secretary of State was that the deal could be accepted and did not need to go before the Competition Commission. On the basis of the OFT's report, which made no reference to the closure proposal and concentrated on competition policy matters only, the Secretary of State accepted the recommendation. The Secretary of State was, however, misled—the Director General of Fair Trading recently revealed that the OFT knew prior to the report that Saint-Gobain intended to close Biwater.

I assume that if information of that nature had been passed to the Secretary of State, he would have had second thoughts about accepting the OFT recommendation. When, on 3 October, I asked the Secretary of State to refer the matter to the Competition Commission, he decided first to return it to the OFT, on the basis of new information that he had to hand, much of which had been supplied by myself and Councillor David Nuttall, leader of North East Derbyshire district council. Unfortunately, John Vickers, the new Director General of Fair Trading, merely endorsed his predecessor's recommendations. However, the Secretary of State can still refer the matter to the Competition Commission over the head of the OFT. That has been done before by the Secretary of State and his predecessors.

The OFT's report, of which we now have an edited version, with various statistics removed, shows no signs of its having assessed certain matters that are of relevance to the Secretary of State's judgments. Under the Fair Trading Act 1973, he is entitled to consider the impact of the development on UK exports—I have stressed today and in the past the export work in which Biwater is involved—and the distribution of industry and employment in the UK. Neither of those matters is included in the advice that was sent to the Secretary of State by the OFT, and they do not appear to have been given serious consideration. Even given the OFT's concern for competition policy, the arguments that I have summarised today, which were presented in detail to the Secretary of State, override the position that it has taken.

As an alternative to turning to the Competition Commission, the Secretary of State could negotiate an immediate deal with Saint-Gobain to save the day, perhaps involving a new purchaser who will properly operate the plant as a competitor with Saint-Gobain. I see no reason why Biwater (Clay Cross) cannot concentrate on producing much needed pipes for the overseas market—including desperately needed pipes for the third world—while Stanton plc, which operates with a foundry involved in pipe production, from Ilkeston in Derbyshire and from Staveley, which is also in my constituency, could concentrate on the home market, which it mainly supplies.

I hope that the Minister can either tell us exactly what the Secretary of State will do or explain his thinking and confirm when a final decision is to be made. The matter cannot drag on for much longer. We need a response that will save 700 jobs. As early-day motion 1084—which was signed by 103 Labour Members—argued, the matter should go before the Competition Commission, the closure should be put on hold, and the report that would then be published by the commission should be geared towards saving the plant.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Does the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) have the permission of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) to speak?

Mr. Barnes *indicated assent.*

1.14 pm

Mr. Skinner: I have nothing but praise for the work done by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) ever since the closure programme began. He has been involved during every single waking hour, for a simple reason. The case does not involve 700 jobs in the south-east, where unemployment has gone way below the national average. We are talking about an old coalfield and steel area. In some villages in my constituency, where some of the Biwater employees work, the level of hidden unemployment is not dissimilar to that in many other high-unemployment areas in old coalfield regions. You, Mr. McWilliam, know only too well about how much unemployment is hidden. The net result is a rate of some 15 to 20 per cent.

That is why 700 jobs in Clay Cross are as important as a Rover problem spread over 20 constituencies. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry got stuck into the Rover problem. We are still concerned about the eventual outcome, but we managed to get the show back on the road. The case under discussion affects about three constituencies in the main, but it is just as bad—if not worse—in terms of consequences for the people there. All deep mine pits in north Derbyshire have closed and the textile industry has been ripped apart. In my constituency, 700 jobs have gone in the past few months. I think that a similar number of jobs have disappeared in my hon. Friend's constituency and in other parts of the area. We are saying to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, "You've got to do something special here."

We must bear in mind that there has been intrigue from the beginning in this matter. Those concerned went to the Office of Fair Trading and said, "Look here, there's a takeover. This monster conglomerate, Saint-Gobain, is eating things up all over the place and asset stripping. It is like the 1960s and 1970s all over again, like Slater Walker and all the rest, except that it is French." Everyone is hoodwinked, the business is taken

over and they close it within half an hour. What happens then? Two directors of Biwater manage to obtain a directorship in the new firm, Saint-Gobain. It was a dirty intrigue from beginning to end.

Of course, the workers were not told. If it had happened on the mainland of the so-called Europe, common market or whatever it is, they would have been told. We made strong representations to the Department of Trade and Industry and we expected the Office of Fair Trading to do its job. It has not done so, so we have now come to a political crunch. If I were the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, I would not want the OFT to pull the wool over my eyes. I would say, "Look here. I'm the gaffer. I'm the boss in this Department and I'll refer this to the Competition Commission. Never mind about those tinpot civil servants who took the decision." There is too much hiding behind civil servants. When somebody is given the job of Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, he has a duty to ensure that civil servants are considering the political implications of what has happened in this case, which have been outlined so precisely by my hon. Friend.

It is a race against time. There is only a month. The shop stewards and workers are fed up to the back teeth. If anybody is to be blamed, it should be Saint-Gobain and Biwater. The trouble is that we can say that it is their fault only if the Secretary of State does the decent thing and implements my hon. Friend's proposal. He should refer the matter to the Competition Commission, irrespective of what the OFT does. The OFT is employed by the state and paid by the taxpayer—by all of us here. Why should it decide what the issues should be? The Secretary of State should stand above its decision and re-negotiate it to ensure the survival of this viable plant—we are not talking about an uneconomic unit, here—so that those workers can keep their jobs and the dole queues will not rise in Clay Cross and Bolsover resulting in the taxpayer picking up a massive bill for dole and unemployment benefits.

1.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) on securing this important debate. The Government recognise the devastating effect that the announcement of the closure of Clay Cross has had on workers at the plant and on the local community. That has been articulated by my hon. Friend and by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), who spoke with great passion. The closure of the plant, which plays a key role in the employment and wider economy of the area, has clearly come as a heavy blow. We fully understand the efforts that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire has made to bring this case to the attention of the House.

Part of the Government's competition policy relates to the regulation of mergers, and it might be helpful if I outline that process. The Secretary of State considers merger cases on the basis of advice provided by the Director General of Fair Trading. The officials of the DGFT in the Office of Fair Trading undertake an analysis of a merger that meets the qualifying criteria under the Fair Trading Act 1973. In particular, they will consider the effects of the merger on competition in the relevant markets.

It is the policy of the Government to refer merger cases to the Competition Commission for further investigation primarily on competition grounds. It is open to the DGFT and to Ministers to consider other issues, which can be broadly categorised as public interest issues and could include, for example, the effect on employment, regional development, or national security. However, as the Office of Fair Trading's own published guidance states, only in very exceptional circumstances would such considerations be a decisive factor.

Mr. Skinner: Is that acceptable?

Mr. Johnson: It is the process that is always applied. I shall come on to talk about the specific case in a moment.

The primary purpose of merger control is to consider and, if necessary, block or amend those mergers that are identified as having adverse effects on competition in markets. Merger control is, therefore, part of a competition policy whose aim is to improve the dynamism, innovation and efficiency of the economy as a whole, which we believe is the best means of securing jobs.

Once the Director General of Fair Trading has advised, the Secretary of State may refer the case to the Competition Commission for further investigation. The commission may recommend clearing the merger, in which case that would be the end of the matter, or find that the merger is against the public interest because of adverse effects. If the latter happens, the Competition Commission may recommend seeking undertakings from the parties to remedy the adverse effects, or simply blocking the merger. The Secretary of State can accept or reject those recommendations, including clearing the merger.

I would now like to turn to the specific case that we are debating today. The merger between Stanton and Biwater was notified to the OFT in April 2000. It received information from the parties and asked, publicly, for third-party comments on the merger. Although Stanton did tell the OFT of its plans to close Clay Cross, the OFT was unable to seek the views of third parties on the plans as the information was commercially confidential and its release without the provider's permission could have breached the Fair Trading Act 1973.

The OFT carefully considered the merger between Stanton and Biwater. The DGFT advised the Secretary of State on 21 June that the merger should be cleared. This advice was put on the OFT website, at the request of the Secretary of State, on 13 October. I do not intend to repeat it here. The essential points are that the DGFT found that the merger raised no competition concerns, on the basis of which advice the Secretary of State cleared the merger on 29 June. However, it is important that hon. Members are aware that the advice given to the Secretary of State did not refer to Stanton's plans to close Clay Cross.

I shall now explain the steps that the Government have taken since we became aware that the Clay Cross plant was to shut. My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire mentioned that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has

[Mr. Johnson]

taken a personal interest in the case. The meeting that he described took place on 22 September. Immediately following that meeting, he asked the Director General of Fair Trading to publish the advice that he had given to Ministers on the case. We have also responded to requests from my hon. Friend and other interested parties to look again at the decision.

Under the Fair Trading Act 1973, a merger decision may be revisited if material facts in relation to a merger not in the public domain were not disclosed. However, the plans to close the plant, which were disclosed to the OFT, do not constitute such material facts. My hon. Friend wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 3 October asking him to refer the merger to the Competition Commission on the basis of other, new material facts that he said were contained in documents that he had sent to the Secretary of State.

On 9 October, my right hon. Friend asked the Director General of Fair Trading to look at the information provided by my hon. Friend and others. Some of the information related to the period since June and therefore cannot have been made available to the OFT when it undertook its analysis of the case. I understand that the director general and his staff have carefully examined all the information that was provided to them. Following that examination, the director general wrote on 23 October to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire.

Mr. Barnes: How would the material that had to be made available to the Office of Fair Trading by June relate to the Biwater annual report from which I quoted? That report showed the viability of the plant, but it was not publicly available until October, and it would not have been submitted until the year ending 31 April. The report might have been examined by the OFT, but it was not examined very carefully.

Mr. Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point about information that may have become available after the merger but was based on facts that were known before then. I shall deal with that point when I come to the crux of the matter—where we go from here.

The Director General of Fair Trading concluded that the information was not material and that it would not have affected the then director general's analysis of the case in June. He said also that the new information did not rebut the evidence for a lack of significant competition concerns considered by the then director general, nor his conclusion that the case should be cleared. On those grounds the director general sees no grounds for re-opening the case. However, we are aware of the separate approaches being made to the European Commission, and we shall obviously consider the Commission's views to see whether they are relevant.

I shall now describe the steps that the Government have taken to deal with the impact of the closure. First, immediately after seeing my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire and hon. Members for the neighbouring constituencies on 22 September, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote to the chief executive of Saint-Gobain, Mr. Beffa, asking him to consider the options for preventing the closure. Mr. Beffa made clear in his reply that the decision had been taken for strong commercial reasons which the company were not prepared to revisit. Saint-Gobain has stated publicly that its main motivation for the acquisition of Biwater was to protect the position of UK-manufactured ductile iron pipes and fittings in the UK market. I understand that the company's reasons for closing the Biwater plant at Clay Cross arise from a number of factors, including over-capacity in the UK market.

In the time left to me, I shall turn to the practical steps that we are taking to try to ameliorate the impact of the closure. A job shop has been set up on the site to provide advice on job vacancies, retraining and benefits. We have provided rapid response funds to provide enhanced retraining opportunities for the work force over and above existing provisions. A cross-authority working group has been set up by the county council to co-ordinate the response of all its departments and to offer a range of support. Derbyshire county council and North East Derbyshire district council are working on an impact study. That study will assess the overall impact of the closure on the Clay Cross area, including the knock-on effect on Biwater's local suppliers and other local businesses. That will be a valuable tool to inform the group's longer-term work. A wide range of long-term action is also in hand or planned, and some money from the single regeneration budget has been made available. I understand that those are not the concern of my hon. Friends; they are looking to save jobs.

This has been an important debate on an important topic. The Secretary of State has made it absolutely clear that he wants to take into account all the points made by my hon. Friends before he considers the matter further. He will do exactly that, with a view to our assisting in any way that we can to ensure that the matter described so eloquently by my hon. Friends is dealt with, and so that any jobs that can be saved will be saved.

Insurance Industry

1.30 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak to this Adjournment debate. This issue narrowly affects at least 600,000 with-profit policyholders of the Axa insurance companies, but given the precedent that may be created by the case to which I shall refer, almost every family in the country with a life insurance policy could be affected.

I have spent some time ploughing through relevant documents, and they contain pretty esoteric stuff in many respects. To understand some of them seems to require the actuarial equivalent of a PhD. Despite their complexity, however, there are some fairly basic issues of principle, such as who owns the very large—approximately £20 billion—orphan assets or inherited estates that lie in the major life insurance companies. Should policyholders own 90 per cent. of such assets, as tradition and ministerial and official guidance suggests, or should the assets be apportioned differently?

The press, including the *Daily Mail*, have taken up this issue with a vengeance. Many people strongly believe that allowing the Axa case to set a precedent would fit firmly into the Government's rip-off Britain policy. I am aware that the case is subject to legal action, and it is clear that the political dimension must be dealt with in that context. However, the case is rather unusual in political and legal terms, in that it is a public interest case brought by the Consumer Association with strong public backing.

A minute or two ago, a note was handed to me stating that the first round of the legal action was determined this morning. The Consumer Association has been awarded preventive costs of £100,000 to pursue its case against the insurance company, so it appears to have won the first round. According to that note—I have not established this yet—the judge has confirmed what the Consumer Association has argued all along: that this is not merely a narrow and technical legal issue, and that major public policy issues are involved that concern the Treasury and the Financial Services Authority, among others.

I shall return to those public policy issues in more detail, but let me summarise them now. Essentially, there are four issues. One is the status of Government guidance—originally provided by a Minister, but reaffirmed by the Treasury—on the so-called 90:10 rule. What is the current status of that guidance? The second issue concerns the FSA's performance, which seems a clear case of regulatory capture, as it is termed in the industry. Thirdly, there are issues relating to the Inland Revenue. I am in no sense a tax lawyer—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. We are having some problems here, and it would help if the hon. Gentleman were to establish the exact position of this case. Has it been put down for trial?

Dr. Cable: I am not enough of a lawyer to give a proper legal assessment. As I understand it, a case is being heard before the High Court, in which the Consumer Association is involved on the policyholders' behalf, and a preliminary round of hearings was held this morning. The matter has been the subject of a great deal of press comment—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has made it clear that the case is sub judice, so I am afraid that specific discussion of it is out of order. However, he is open to argue the general principle.

Dr. Cable: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You have pointed the way, and I shall try to be careful not to refer too much to matters under discussion in court. My point was was that there are substantial issues of public policy principle, to which I wish to return in detail later.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that he must not refer to the specifics of that case at all?

Dr. Cable: May I then define the problem in general terms? Insurance companies in general have orphan assets—assets set aside for long-term prudential purposes—which probably derive from the fact that bonuses that were insufficiently generous in the past have resulted in the accumulation of very substantial sums of money. The question is how those orphan assets should be allocated. The traditional assumption has been that 90 per cent. of them should be allocated to policyholders. That principle has been established in two ways: it features in the articles of association of all life insurance companies, and it was the subject of a Government guideline set out in 1995 by a Minister called Jonathan Evans—of whom I had not previously heard—which has subsequently been reiterated by the Treasury. I hope that I have understood correctly that that is the current position.

I have a little difficulty in proceeding, as I am unsure how far I can illustrate the general points that I want to make with reference to a particular case. You have ruled that the case in question is sub judice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I cannot pursue my line of argument. However, the case has been in the public domain, and many of the issues that we have to discuss relate to its public presentation. May I seek clarification, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Does your ruling imply that coverage of the matter in the press, including today's press, technically represents a breach of the law by the newspapers concerned?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It may or may not represent a breach of the law, but it does breach the Standing Orders of the House. I am dealing here with the sub judice rule in those Standing Orders. Any other question is a matter for the courts and not for us.

Dr. Cable: Your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker, makes it very difficult for me to deal with the two essential elements in the case, which relate to the principle of apportionment and to the conduct of the ballot, which is highly contentious. I shall move quickly to my conclusion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because you have cut the heart out of my subject, although, obviously, I respect your judgment. I shall proceed to the issues that affect the Government.

I have read the Minister's spirited article in the *Daily Mail*, in which she takes the view that this matter is not her direct responsibility. She correctly says that she did

[Dr. Cable]

not approve the decision made by a particular insurance company, and that it is, therefore, not her direct ministerial responsibility. She took the view that examination of the matter by the Financial Services Authority and the courts provided adequate protection to policyholders.

However, there are issues involving public policy to which I hope the Minister will be able to respond within the constraints that we have had placed on us. The first relates to the guidance that the Government have given regarding the 90:10 rule, which has been changed by this case. Does the 90:10 rule still apply? It has clearly generated confusion, and there are now several different interpretations of it. The company involved obviously made a different interpretation from that of the policyholders. Does the Minister plan to re-state that guidance? Would that require legislation, whether primary or secondary? Everyone concerned with the problem—in general terms, and not necessarily in relation to that court action—would like clarification on the Government's stance on the 90:10 apportionment principle.

The second matter of public policy relates to the Financial Services Authority, which reviewed the case in its capacity as regulator. The problem is whether the FSA has acted as one would expect of an effective and independent regulator. When it was set up—as the Minister must remember with pain because she guided the legislation through the House—interminable presentations were made and amendments suggested, almost all of them on behalf of practitioners. Many of those points were perfectly valid, but some of us, particularly those who argued from the consumer viewpoint, always feared that practitioner interests would come to dominate the FSA. We have seen that happen with other regulators—for instance, it was said at one stage that Oftel had been captured by BT. The danger is that a regulator, because of a lack of knowledge of the industry, will tend to err on the side of practitioners rather than consumers.

I am referring to the work of the FSA rather than the matter now being considered in court when I ask how, as a matter of general principle, the interests of a large number of life insurance policyholders can be represented at the FSA. The policyholders appear not to have had a voice. I also question the FSA's expertise. Different judgments have been given on complex matters by independent actuaries, which the FSA seems either not to have considered or not to have understood. Another matter is the conduct of the ballot in the case under consideration by the court, and whether the FSA properly considered the detail involved—but I am not allowed to refer to that. However, the main point is that the FSA has refused to divulge details of its findings on the ground of commercial confidentiality. I should have hoped that, acting as an independent regulator in the public interest, it would do so.

The third point of public policy—I am trying to stay as close as I can to my subject without contravening Mr. Deputy Speaker's ruling—relates to the Inland Revenue. If companies depart from the 90:10 rule and seek to use part of their orphan assets for tax planning purposes, shareholders will pay less tax. It is possible to use orphan assets for tax planning—or, more provocatively, tax avoidance—purposes. The Inland Revenue clearly has an interest in the matter, and I sincerely hope that the Treasury has spotted the scope for large-scale tax avoidance by the insurance industry once the 90:10 rule is breached.

My final point is a broad one about the insurance industry. The industry is undergoing a massive process of consultation, takeovers are imminent and demutualisation is possible for some of the large insurers. The future of Equitable Life is highly uncertain, which raises the question of how its orphan assets should be utilised. In many ways, that question will be determined by the precedent that we are not allowed to discuss today. None the less, a broad public policy issue is involved. Within the constraints that we have been set, I hope that the Minister can give us some broad idea of how orphan assets can be utilised in the future.

1.43 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I, too, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will do my best to stick to your injunctions on the specific case involved. I therefore apologise in case some of the questions asked by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) cannot be answered as fully as he would like.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. It will help if I run through the general background of inherited estates and the role of the Government and the regulator in these matters, without commenting on the specifics in which the hon. Gentleman and I are interested.

Issues related to inherited estates, commonly known as orphan assets, arise because a number of with-profits offices have accumulated surplus assets in their long-term business funds. That is to say, they have built up amounts over and above those strictly required to meet their liabilities and the statutory margin of solvency. Those sums can be used to smooth investment returns for policyholders from year to year.

The law requires all insurance companies to keep the assets of their long-term business in segregated funds known as long-term business funds, which can be used only for the purposes of long-term business. The surplus in the long-term business fund is termed an estate. The surplus is also used to meet policyholders' reasonable expectations in respect of the financial security of the fund and, as the hon. Gentleman said, the company's future investment and bonus policies. However, to the extent that prudent management of the estate permits, part of the surplus can be distributed to policyholders and shareholders. The terms on which distributions are made are often governed by each life office's constitutional documents. However, as the hon. Gentleman observed, it is common practice in shareholder-owned life offices for distributions to be made in the ratio of 90:10 between policyholders and shareholders respectively.

In some cases, the surplus estate has been allowed to grow up over a long time and has been passed from one generation of policyholders to the next. It is this class of surplus that is often called an inherited or orphan estate. The estate may reach a point at which it exceeds what is considered necessary for the efficient management of the business. In such circumstances, the company may wish to manage down the level of the estate by making a distribution in a manner agreed with the regulator.

Although inherited estates have been built up over many years, in most cases the status of the funds and the appropriate basis of their attribution are clear. However, it does not apply to all insurance matters and all companies; in a small number of shareholder-owned life offices, that is not so. Over the years, policies and practices in those offices may have changed, and there may be doubts about the overall entitlements of shareholders and policyholders in relation to the attribution of surplus.

The Government's general policy on the attribution of inherited estates of insurance companies remains as set out in the reply of 24 July 1998 given by the then Economic Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), to a question asked by my hon. Friend for Halton (Mr. Twigg). That statement confirmed the principle that the interests of policyholders and shareholders in with-profits life funds should generally stand in the ratio 90:10. As the hon. Member for Twickenham said, that policy was identical to the one taken by the previous Administration in 1995. The 90:10 principle reflected common practice in the industry, and the present and previous Administrations felt that that ratio would be a starting point for policyholders' reasonable expectations in any attribution of inherited states. The general principle on distributions and attributions is subject to interpretation depending on circumstances—for example, the constitution of the life office, contractual commitments, company statements of practice or any other relevant factors. The Government have no wish to move away from that principle. The 1998 statement has applied to all mergers and acquisitions involving life business since then.

The hon. Gentleman asked what is the Government's role. We do not seek to interfere in the individual investment and management decisions of individual life offices, nor in the contractual relationship between life offices and policyholders. In the normal course of events, it is for companies, in consultation with their policyholders, to decide how to run their life businesses. Our intention in making the 1998 statement on the distribution of inherited estates was to reaffirm the view taken by the previous Administration. Our announcement on the 90:10 rule sought to draw together general industry practice and influence how such distributions might be made in future. As I have sketched it out, application of the principle will depend on the constitutions and business requirements of individual firms.

Treasury Ministers are responsible for general policy direction and for making proposals for legislation. The Financial Services Authority is carrying out day-to-day regulation of insurance companies on behalf of the Treasury. We are behaving now as we will when the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 comes fully into force. Any insurance company is free to seek to undertake corporate reorganisation of its business. Insurance companies are, however, obliged to take their proposals for such reorganisation to the High Court, which, having been advised by an independent actuary, will decide whether to sanction the reorganisation. As the regulator, the FSA has the right to make representations to the court and will exercise that right in any case. However, it has an on-going supervisory role for the purpose of protecting policyholders against the risk that the company will be unable to fulfil its liabilities.

Furthermore, in the case of long-term business, the regulator should seek to ensure that proposed changes to the management of life funds are consistent with the company's requirements to fulfil the reasonable expectations of policyholders. The concept of the reasonable expectations of policyholders derives from legislation, but is not defined in it. The FSA carries out the day-to-day supervision of insurance companies on behalf of the Treasury. It is for the FSA to ensure that those companies are meeting the reasonable expectations of policyholders.

The hon. Gentleman made a specific point about operation of the FSA and asked how independently it is acting and how much it is taking account of consumers' interests. It is, of course, acting entirely independently in circumstances such as those under discussion. In cases of proposed change, it has to take its own independent legal and actuarial advice as necessary. It is also required by legislation to balance consumer protection, competition and other issues in the course of arriving at any decisions or representations. The accumulation of significant surplus assets or inherited estates is not necessarily a matter for concern. Different companies have different approaches, depending on their liabilities and their preferred methods of business management. There are arguments for and against retention or distribution of surplus assets. From the regulator's point of view, corporate strategies must ensure that liabilities are met and that the margins of solvency are maintained.

Under your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I cannot comment on a specific case. It is not the place of the FSA or of the Government to approve or disapprove any particular scheme. Any company has the right to go to court. The regulator's sole role is to assess the likely reasonableness of the scheme in respect of policyholders' expectations. It is for individual policyholders to decide in the light of their personal circumstances whether they want to accept any particular offer.

Eligible policyholders can be asked to decide whether they would agree to the allocation of their policies to a new arrangement. They will have to accept that any agreement reached could cause them to forgo their interests in possible future distributions from the assets of an inherited estate. The present interest in orphan assets has arisen on the basis of a particular case, on which we cannot comment. It is worthwhile to point out that, were any provision to be made, the funds of policyholders who did not accept the agreement would have to be kept in a separate fund to which the general 90:10 principle would still apply.

I hope that my comments on the background to the issue and on the Government's role have been useful to the hon. Gentleman and to other hon. Members who are interested in the topic. I have described a number of important checks and balances that have been built into the legislative and regulatory frameworks in order to safeguard the reasonable expectations of policyholders in an open and transparent way.

It is important for the hon. Gentleman to appreciate that the FSA is carrying out its regulatory functions effectively and efficiently and is taking account of the

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

relevant policy issues in discharging its responsibilities, and that the Government are continuing to act in line with the policy framework that has operated for some time in relation to these matters. I hope that he now appreciates the status of the 90:10 rule and the ability of Ministers or the Treasury to intervene, or, as in this or any case, not to intervene, in the decision of companies to place particular cases before the courts. It is up to the company concerned, and is not, therefore, a matter in which I, as a Treasury Minister, can successfully intervene.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 November 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Export Credits Guarantee Department

[*Relevant documents: Third Report from the Trade and Industry Committee, Session 1999-2000 HC52 and the Government's response thereto HC 849.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Sutcliffe.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce this debate on the report that my colleagues and I on the Select Committee on Trade and Industry published some time ago on the future of the Export Credits Guarantee Department.

The Select Committee system, which has achieved a new status akin to the unofficial Opposition in recent years, has tried to introduce into our opaque system of scrutiny some openness and transparency. It was no accident that when the Department of Trade and Industry indicated that it wanted to conduct an inquiry into the mission statement and objectives of the ECGD, my colleagues and I thought that it would be a good opportunity to parallel the inquiry. We invited the respondents to the Government's request for views to meet us and discuss their concerns. We were fortunate in obtaining a wide spread of opinion and at some of our hearings we were able to gauge opinion across the board from industry, non-governmental agencies, financiers and so on. By and large, the ECGD received a reasonable rating and was thought to be a useful part of the Government's bureaucracy and administration.

It might be fashionable to suggest that it has taken an unconscionable time for this debate to take place, given that we produced our report on 11 January. However, I shall not take that route because I understand all too well that the Government were operating on a different time scale from the Committee.

The report on the Government's response was produced just before the House rose for the summer recess in July, only a little later than we might have anticipated. We have only just returned from the summer recess and we have been reasonably fortunate in obtaining this debate so early, so I shall not complain about that.

During the past 12 months, the ECGD has attracted attention, particularly of non-governmental groups in the United Kingdom, as a result of its association with the Ilisu dam project in Turkey. I shall refer to that shortly and some of my colleagues on the Select Committee and I will take the opportunity to visit the dam when we go to Turkey.

It might be useful to put on the record the services offered by the ECGD. It provides insurance and finance facilities. There are four generic insurance or guarantee projects and cover for exports of capital goods and services against non-payment or contract frustration. There is a fixed rate export finance scheme operating fixed interest rates for loans to cover purchases of United Kingdom exports. That is set under Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development consensus rules.

Before I continue, I should like to ask the Minister to explain why a scheme such as the fixed rate export finance scheme, which is widely accepted and appreciated by industry, now seems to be under a degree of threat. It has been suggested that it is to be withdrawn. If that is the case, will the Minister tell us under what time scale the withdrawal process will operate? One of the more valued aspects of the ECGD would appear, in some people's eyes, to be under a degree of threat.

Cover is also provided for political risk on overseas equity and loan investments. That operates under the ECGD overseas investment insurance scheme. It is another reassuring service provided by the export credits agency. There is also an export insurance policy covering capital goods, major services and construction projects. It is important that we ensure that our people who are going out and trading in the world have a degree of certainty that they will not lose because of customer insolvency, late payment, contract non-compliance or circumstances involving an element of political risk. Those issues are certainly addressed by the services of the ECGD.

The ECGD offers guarantees to commercial bank lenders, with a 100 per cent. guarantee on all sums lent to overseas buyers. It also offers the supplier credit financing scheme, which allows UK companies to sell bills of exchange to their bank, once goods have been sent, or promissory notes once they have been accepted by the buyer. These facilities are all important in the stimulation and sustenance of trade.

The lines of credit that can be provided for several schemes and contracts simultaneously afford an important degree of flexibility. Project financing schemes in which the repayment of the costs of the project will come from its operation are particularly worthy of mention because they allow exporters a degree of flexibility. The exporters know that the money will be forthcoming once the project is up and running, but until that happens and earnings are accruing, there is no means of paying off the project loan. It is important for them to be able to obtain that degree of support and underwriting. That is a testimony to the flexibility of the ECGD. It was clear from the responses that we obtained from the industrial community that the ECGD has a good name internationally for innovation and flexibility.

The export credit agency world is highly competitive. The status of the international consortiums that pursue the big projects and potentially dangerous contracts can change quite easily. Instead of having a lead British company, one might end up with a Swiss or a French one taking the lead because the ECA in question was the most flexible and offered the best rates. We recognise that that is done under an umbrella of OECD consensus arrangements, so the possibility no longer exists for companies and countries to undercut each other or to provide additional assistance. Policing by the World Trade Organisation and other bodies now underpins that.

[Mr. Martin O'Neill]

This is an international business. There are about 39 other ECAs across the world. The G7 members are probably our closest collaborators and therefore, by definition, competitors. If our businesses are to operate abroad and, more important, to consolidate links in the supply chain into the heart of British manufacturing, Britain has to be one of the major guarantors, with the ECGD providing the cornerstone of the support. It is often convenient for British international operators to join other partners from other countries. However, if they do so in a subordinate position, UK plc could suffer as a result of small and medium-sized enterprises, dependent on the big fish, being denied access to markets. The matter should be seen in a business and manufacturing context. It is important to get the funding in place at the right time.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that on several occasions there have been fairly unconscionable delays—caused largely, but not exclusively, by Treasury interference in the process—that have led to the lead ECA being changed from our own to one of the others, thus damaging British industry?

Mr. O'Neill: The hon. Gentleman, my colleague on the Committee, has anticipated my next point. ECAs operate under certain constraints, such as the budgetary constraints that are imposed by the nature of the public sector borrowing requirement. There is a limit to the amount that any country could, or should, be prepared to underwrite for business. It is only fair that criteria must be set down. No prudent underwriter in any kind of business would over-extend the credit that he was prepared to offer.

I worked in an insurance office for some years, and I remember that it was said of our actuarial colleagues—perhaps the most sophisticated group of underwriters—that they were people who found accounting too exciting. Underwriters are extremely cautious by nature, and it is correct that national underwriters should be so in respect of commercial undertakings of the kind that we are discussing. An ECA should be cautious.

However, there is an unnecessary degree of Treasury interference—that was one of the least attractive elements of the evidence that we received repeatedly from business advisers and others. Any broadening and deepening of the export credits arrangements will probably come not from an increase in public expenditure, but from a more formal and more flexible arrangement with the public sector.

At one time, the ECGD's activities covered all export credit arrangements—it had a virtual monopoly. That has changed. For short-term business, the private sector has adopted a healthy approach, underwriting the least risky of risks. It has perhaps been a wee bit too cautious about getting involved in medium-term business. This is not a matter of ideology—public sector versus private sector. On the big projects, with large sums of money at stake or a greater than normal risk, the sovereign state's underwriting is a priority.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): In taking evidence from the private sector, did the hon. Gentleman not find that it had an appetite for taking more of the work that is currently undertaken by the ECGD?

Mr. O'Neill: Provided that the work is not too risky. The private sector was quite interested in taking over some other parts because it was emboldened by its experience in short-term business. Private firms were prepared to move into medium- term business. I gained the impression that there was not much resistance to that. Even in countries such as the Netherlands and France, which have privately run export credit guarantee arrangements, the bottom line is still provided by the Government. Whether it is carried out through a Government Department or through private financial institutions, the buck stops with the Government. People will not believe that the arrangements are copper bottomed unless the national Government's role is clear.

I see no fundamental problem with financial institutions wanting to extend their role. The bona fides are there for everyone to examine. Equally, however, if that happens, it should enable the Government to be more adventurous and deal with problems more quickly. It is not all down to the bureaucratic obstructionism of the Treasury, which is reported in the document and which I leave others to develop if they want to. It is equally important to recognise the first come, first served basis, which could cause difficulties if an application—regardless of how pressing it might be—is made at the wrong time of year. Some people will have to wait in the queue because only so much money is available for underwriting.

The need previously imposed on the organisation to wash its face annually has now been changed. We are now talking about a triennial rolling programme, which is more flexible and sensible. Sometimes the horses that we have backed economically do not even get to the starting gate, let alone the finishing line. We have recently been committed to providing financial support for projects in south and east Asia, which never saw the light of day. The freedom enjoyed by the ECGD at that time was such that it was unable to move to areas outwith the designated ones. If some contracts were not lost, they were certainly put in danger.

PSBR constraints and private sector involvement are key issues. The Select Committee accepted—and the Government have not demurred from this—that the National Economic Research Associates report made a case for collaboration, but that there remained a role for the Government to intervene where there was market failure. The Government are not only the insurer of last resort, but the ultimate arbiter of assessing how major problems can be resolved. The Select Committee believes that the Government's role should be viewed with a degree of flexibility.

We were, however, clearly unhappy about the dead hand of the Treasury. The scabrous fist of the Chancellor and others at times has a desperate effect. We made several criticisms about interference. It is not worth going through them all today, but will the Minister explain what is happening about the implementation of the KPMG report? That would be helpful.

It seems that the sight of the Treasury in retreat was a false dawn. It may have retreated a wee bit, but it has circled the wagons and is holding out once again. There was widespread criticism of the Treasury's unhelpful approach, which, whether wittingly or unwittingly, was not conducive to the good standing of the ECGD or those who sought its assistance.

We should consider other matters relating to the ECGD, such as its good projects in difficult markets scheme. Had this debate taken place 10 days ago, I wonder what the news would have been. There is an unwritten rule in our public administration system that the prospect of hanging—in whatever form—serves to concentrate the departmental mind. Thus, contracts that have been pursued interminably are somehow completed out of the blue when a debate or Select Committee hearing is forthcoming.

We welcome the construction of the Russian pipeline under the Black sea to Turkey. It has proved an incredibly complex undertaking, but we are somewhat worried that it takes two years for the first of such projects to see the light of day. Joined-up government seems a wee bit difficult to achieve in this area. I congratulate the ECGD on getting the contract through, but why did it take such an incredibly long time? Were there internal bureaucratic problems or misgivings about Turkey? My Select Committee colleagues and I are involved in trade as well as industry, and we shall visit Turkey, which is a candidate member of the European Union, in the next few months. We therefore want to know whether there were problems on the Turkish side or on the Russian side, or whether bureaucracy was at fault.

There are two further areas that I should like to discuss. I am not sure that the ECGD's response to environmental and developmental standards is anything more than a token one, and I remain unconvinced that the established criteria are as rigorous as they ought to be. There have been delays, and someone has recently been appointed to deal with them, which is encouraging. However, we need to be convinced about matters relating to the greening of Government, as it were. To what extent has the ECGD embraced such concepts? I must tell the Minister that some form of agreement within the Government on these matters is not enough by itself; there has to be an international initiative, so that common standards can be set. The OECD should be persuaded to give a lead in establishing international consensus on environmental standards. In adopting the moral high ground and securing an agreement, we must not be disadvantaged by others who choose their own standards. In this, the best should not be the enemy of the good. I should like to think that if our own house is just about in order—I still have misgivings about that—we should be entering the international debate and trying to secure consensus of a kind that would not disadvantage us in relation to our most obvious competitors.

I should like to think also that environmental standards would be applied to defence contracts. For too long we have glossed over some aspects of the matter and we need to examine carefully the way in which the ECGD operates in relation to defence as a whole. It is a long time now since I was deeply involved in defence matters, but when I was, I was always struck by the fact that people to whom one sells arms are invariably keen to pay for them. They know that if they do not, the supply will dry up. I taught in an inner urban school and one day we were talking about the payment of bills. I asked, "Which bill must you always pay?" One of the kids said, "My dad always pays the telephone bill." This was in the days before mobile phones. I said, "Why is that?" and he said, "Because it's the only way he can keep in touch with the bookie." There is an element of that in the supply of arms.

I am never convinced that export credits are all that necessary in all defence contracts. Those concerned have a vested interest in being well defended, and if they want a degree of defence that calls for expenditure of the order that we are considering, they should be able to pay for it, or other ways should be found of dealing with it. The budget in question, which is always under constraint, should not be stretched and stressed in quite the way that it is with respect to some clients to whom we sell defence equipment.

I have no great objections to many of our defence sales. I am not arguing against them. However, the big guys who sell armaments by and large know that they can afford what they are doing. The little elbow room that they are given by Government might be better directed at other parts of the British manufacturing economy or British business generally. They could receive assistance in that way.

I am also concerned about the Turkish situation and the Ilisu dam. When my colleagues and I go there we shall consider how environmental criteria that the ECGD sets itself will be applied. We recognise that human rights issues arise and relate in many ways to the environmental question, with respect to the displacement of people and their rehabilitation. The issue of relocation in general needs to be considered. We have not set our face against the project. Like the Minister, we take the view, after a subsequent hearing on Ilisu, that unless certain standards are met, the project should not proceed. However, I realise that the jury, in the form of the international study to which the Minister has committed himself, is still out. We want to know the outcome.

The Committee supports the ECGD in its report. We want it to be a genuine, free-standing, arm's length agency with the degree of independence to which it is entitled. It has always been something of a hybrid. It has been answerable to the Department of Trade and Industry. It has been interfered with. Some Departments think that they should have a say, but do not, and others are glad that they do not. There needs to be a bit of status building and we should like to think that that will happen before too long. We recognise the importance of the Government's commitment to a new mission statement and of their continued sounding-out of this matter. It is vital to achieve the right result, because there is only one opportunity in every 10 years to carry out this exercise. I am not too impatient about the time that it takes, but I hope that this will not go on indefinitely.

We took the view that to be a successful agency, the ECGD should enjoy autonomy. It should be accountable to Ministers in Parliament and have the commercial freedom that is implied by getting the Treasury out of the way. It should also be transparent. Some of the misgivings that have been expressed, particularly by non-governmental agencies and

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organisations, have resulted from the lack of information and transparency. Equally, there must be the competitiveness that requires the agency, on behalf of British business, to take on those other export credit agencies across the world that are, understandably, trying to get a share of the business.

While the Minister has been conducting his latest sounding process there have been signs that gaps in the agency are being filled. I welcome David Allwood's appointment as an environmental specialist. The consultation on business principles, matters of openness, debt sustainability, human rights, sustainable development, good governance and business integrity are welcome. One could ask why they were not there before, but, as we know, there is often rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents. There may be sinners in Victoria street and elsewhere who are beginning to repent.

The ECGD is an institution that we would harm at our peril. It supports British business and enables us to get contracts. It ensures that not just high profile, large companies, but small companies down the chain are involved in an international market. That cannot be bad for British business. But we must also recognise that the world and our own society demand far more of our institutions than they demanded before. We want them to be competitive and successful, but we want them also to represent not just the best in British manufacturing and engineering, but Britain operating as a principled nation on the world stage. We are working for the best interests of the world economy and thereby helping our own people too.

3.2 pm

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) said. The ECGD has been doing an extremely good job. It has been constrained by certain elements that have already been mentioned. It performs an important role for British industry and commerce. It is a role that can be improved, but it has served the country well in the recent past.

I particularly welcome the role of Sir David Wright as a member of the advisory board. Close liaison between the ECGD and British Trade International, which I gather is now called Trade Partners UK, is important and can only help us for the future. I am also pleased to welcome the Minister for Trade, in his present role. As a former chairman of our Select Committee, he knows the details of the problem only too well. A man of his ability and integrity will be an asset to the role that he now fulfils. I hope that he can assist us further with some of the matters about which we are not terribly happy.

Many of us were somewhat disappointed in some areas of the Government response. The hon. Member for Ochil referred to our conclusion that the criteria for the ECGD should be autonomy, accountability, commercial freedom and transparency in competitiveness. It was therefore disappointing that the best that the Government could come up with was to say that normal Cabinet Office criteria would apply. That is not enough in this case, nor is it an adequate response to the Committee's thoughtful and considered report.

I remain anxious about autonomy. The hon. Member for Ochil referred to the dead hand of the Treasury and we took much evidence that showed that many applications to the ECGD for help were delayed by Treasury intervention, which cannot be allowed to continue.

The KPMG report is now available, somewhat belatedly. If such a report were needed, it should have been embarked upon some time ago. At least we now have it, and the issues that need to be tackled have been identified. The Minister must tell us when those issues will be addressed and when the proposals will be implemented so that the ECGD can act autonomously, subject only to overall economic criteria being supervised by the Treasury. In the meantime, until there is full autonomy, the right hon. Gentleman must tell us what will be done to minimise delays, because they are still occurring and that cannot be allowed to continue.

On reinsurance, it is true that more can and should be done with the private sector. I hope that the Minister will tell us what progress has been made.

I do not know how good projects in difficult markets are defined. As the hon. Member for Ochil said, why is Turkey considered a difficult market? Why did it take two years for the pipeline project from Russia to Turkey to be accepted? As far as I know, that is the only project under these criteria that has been accepted to date, but I hope that the Minister will tell me that I am wrong. Turkey should not be a difficult market; it is a member of NATO, a reliable ally, a country with which we have had close trading relations for a long time and a nation that has applied to join the European Community.

I gather that some of the problems with the Ilisu dam related to the dead hand not of the Treasury but of the Foreign Office. Much correspondence has passed between the Foreign Office and the Department of Trade and Industry on that subject. We want to know what is in that correspondence. What is the nature of it? Why were there so many delays? I understand that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that he was prepared to release the correspondence into the public domain, but that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office vetoed the suggestion. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us on the subject when he replies to the debate. Has the Foreign Office vetoed release of the correspondence and, if so, why? If it has not, when will we be allowed to see it?

It is right that there should be environmental assessments of projects that we are financing. It is also important that environmental standards are applied equally by the ECAs of other countries; thus the participation of the ECGD in the international forums that discuss such matters is vital—it is vital, too, that our assessment process for environmental standards is at least as speedy as that of other nations. We shall not do ourselves any good if the time that we take to make such assessments is far longer than that taken by competitor nations and as a result we suffer the same disadvantages that we are hoping to eliminate in the case of the Treasury.

It has been suggested that the reinsurance facility may be withdrawn. Exporters certainly want it, and it is impossible to see how the process will continue unless the Government are prepared to be the reinsurer of last resort. Can the Minister tell us exactly what is intended?

Our report was published in January and the hon. Member for Ochil said that he did not think that it was bad that we did not receive a response from the Government until the end of July. I think that it is appalling that we had to wait more than six months and that the response arrived when Parliament was going into recess, so the issue was kicked into the long grass. Only now, in November, do we have the opportunity to debate our report and the Government's response. Why did the Government take so long to say so little? Again, I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say, although I accept that it is not his personal responsibility, as he assumed his present role relatively recently.

The initial Government response was that they still insisted on an annual break-even for the ECGD. I think that that has now been relaxed and that they allow for a triennial basis. It is encouraging that the Treasury at last realises that in the real world people work on other criteria than an annual basis.

3.12 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) was prevented from leading for our party in this debate by a delay in reaching the Chamber due to personal circumstances. He probably knows more about the subject than anyone else here, so I hope that he will intervene later. I became interested in the subject in my role as Liberal Democrat shadow Secretary of State for International Development—I always hesitate before remembering my exact title.

The subject of the debate is dear to development and important to developing countries. I am well aware that there is a conflict, however. When I say anything about the arms trade, I am always told that there is a need to protect British jobs. I accept that but, as the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) said, we are not talking about many jobs. The people involved could easily be deployed in other industries. I wish that the previous Government had concentrated a little more on turning swords into ploughshares and thought of alternatives to the arms industry. That also applies to this and succeeding Governments. I accept that that is probably a female view and that we must recognise the jobs interest when we consider export credit guarantee assistance to support British industries. The issue has broad effects for our economy and impacts tremendously on our policies on development and developing countries. There is a huge dilemma there, with which I shall deal in a moment.

Everyone wants developing countries to have modern facilities and energy—for example, oil wells, if they have oil—and to develop in the way in which we have developed in the past 200 years. However, a balance must be struck between those and human rights and environmental interests. That is a difficult balance to strike when considering development issues.

There is also the risk to the taxpayer. In a previous debate in this Chamber, I was told repeatedly by the Minister—I think that it was an out-of-hours debate—that there is no cost to the taxpayer and that it is a break-even situation. I simply do not understand or believe that.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): If an export credit agency breaks even, that does not mean that it is operating commercially. If the ECGD were operating like London Underground or the Post Office, it would be expected to earn a 6 per cent. return. No private-sector coal mine or textile factory would stay open indefinitely on a break-even basis. Therefore, a subsidy must surely—implicitly—be involved.

Dr. Tonge: My hon. Friend has just proved my point. His argument is difficult to answer—I certainly cannot do so—but I hope that the Minister will explain why there is no cost to the British taxpayer in export credit guarantees, especially when 95 per cent. of third-world debt is related to export credits. If we are to wipe out that debt, as part of our initiative on debt relief—which was very welcome and on which the Chancellor is to be congratulated—there must be a cost to the taxpayer somewhere. I look forward to hearing the Minister's explanation.

I am particularly interested in the criteria for granting export credit guarantees. The Select Committee report deals with that question. The hon. Member for Ochil said that he suspects that they are little more than a token. In fact, they are like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development guidelines that are often quoted to us, which multinational companies always follow when they are operating in third-world countries. We all know that those guidelines are voluntary, and I suspect that the criteria for export credit guarantees are also voluntary. Will the Minister tell us who monitors them? Who can tell us whether they are being adhered to? Who knows what goes on once the ECG has been granted and the project gets going? Who carries out the audit and the monitoring and provides feedback so that we know that our money is being properly spent?

Human rights considerations are also involved. They relate to the way in which workers are treated, and the way in which people are displaced. A British company is involved in the extraction of oil in southern Sudan, and people are being killed, maimed and driven from their lands. They have nowhere to go and no consultation has taken place. Although we play only a small part, we are a party to what is going on there. We know that the OECD guidelines are not being met in all sorts of projects throughout the world. I ask again: who knows whether the ECGD criteria are being met?

Environmental impact assessments are another interesting factor. How binding are they? In my constituency, we have the threat of terminal 5 at Heathrow airport. There does not appear to have been an environmental impact assessment for that. Who, therefore, carries out such assessments for all these projects abroad before they are granted ECGs? How do we know that they have been carried out effectively?

There is also the debt consideration. A huge consideration for developing countries is whether they will ever be able to pay back the money underwritten by the ECGD. Should we encourage them to take out further loans in the form of ECGs to pursue other projects? That is a thorny question, because therein lies the debt of the future that we shall have to relieve.

The Liberal Democrats feel very strongly about ECGs for arms. They should be given only in exceptional circumstances, especially to developing countries. Everyone accepts that countries have

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legitimate needs for defence equipment for their own defence and to build up their armed forces. However, those criteria have by no means been met in the past, and I suspect that they will not be in future. Indonesia is the example that springs to mind.

I could not fail to mention the Ilisu dam, especially given yesterday's rally in Parliament square—it has been mentioned twice already. It is becoming a scandal that, if it is not soon resolved, will cause much dismay to many people and much criticism of the Government. Huge environmental considerations are involved. Many people, mainly Kurds, will be driven from their lands, with no proper assessment having been made of where they are to go or what will happen to them. Hasankeyf, a valuable and ancient site, will be totally destroyed by the building of the dam, and what does the Foreign Office think about the prospect of water wars between Iraq and Syria?

Those arguments have been rehearsed in this Chamber and elsewhere, yet we are still receiving no answers from the Government. I remind the Minister that the mission to the area that was organised by the non-governmental organisations during the summer reported back that none of the criteria for granting ECGs to Turkey for the Ilisu dam have been met and that it would therefore be very wrong to go ahead with the project.

I have attempted to express my concerns about ECGs, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They have an ethical dimension and go to the heart of the Government's foreign policy, and we need some answers.

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should point out that, much as I appreciate the thought of being elevated to the position of Deputy Speaker, especially as there is a vacancy for the job, I should be addressed as Mr. O'Hara in this Chamber.

3.22 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Thank you, Mr. O'Hara. It is a pleasure to be in this Chamber, despite the lack of people. You, the Chairman of the Trade and Industry Committee and I share an "O'" before our surnames. As a proportion of hon. Members present, that must be a record for a debate in the Palace.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I congratulate the Committee and its Chairman on a balanced report on the suggested future role of the ECGD, and associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill).

My interest in the role of the ECGD was sparked in 1994, when I took part in a trade mission to Argentina and Brazil led by the then Minister for Trade, Sir Richard Needham. In those days, I was an international business man, and my prime interest was inward investment into those countries. There were a large number of British exporters on the mission, as well as a senior ECGD representative and some talented and supportive DTI personnel. It became clear then, and in the course of my subsequent business dealings before I entered the House just over a year ago, that the ECGD has been, and is, successful in a highly competitive international market.

That leads one to ask what is in need of change. There is merit in what the ECGD is doing, and we should ensure that that is recognised. It does a good job generally, and is crucial in enabling British business to penetrate riskier markets at some points in their cycle and in product development. It is vital for the support of seed-corn businesses, when trust through committed business relationships is the highest currency for building a presence and creating opportunity in difficult markets. In the long term, if the seed corn is right, opportunities to secure expertise, technological development and a return on research and development in this country can be taken advantage of and built upon.

I want to put on the record the fact that, in my experience, the staff at the ECGD are experts with a real motivation to help. I have met only the highest quality staff, but they have been hampered by constraints. They are leaders among export credit agencies, but it is a perception and perhaps a reality—that is why we are discussing the matter—that interference from the heavy hand of the Treasury risks putting us at an international competitive disadvantage instead of providing a solution and creating opportunities.

This is a good time to take stock and to think about the ECGD's mission. I note that the Government agree in their response that any changes to the ECGD's mission or status should take account of the competitive position of UK exporters and investors. They concluded that its core aim should be to continue to support the UK economy

> by fulfilling its statutory purpose of facilitating trade by insuring UK exporters and overseas investors against medium and long term payment and political risks.

They then qualify that with their argument on the break-even position in a broader financial framework and the other criteria that should be taken into account. That begs the question: what is driving the desire for a change? If the Treasury is concerned, on behalf of British taxpayers, about a sizeable loss as a result of, for example, the Asia crisis, we must examine what happened. First, the Asia crisis was the same for all export credit agencies, so it was an equal hit internationally and competitively. How much did the ECGD lose as a result of the Asia crisis? The Minister may have the facts and figures. I suspect that the loss was small, but that may be the hook on which the Treasury is trying to hang a change.

Furthermore, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) said, there seems to be a widespread suspicion that the ECGD has become a tool of large aircraft, aerospace and defence manufacturers and perhaps the telecommunications companies, although they use the ECGD less. I believe that that suspicion is ill founded. In recent years there has been a dramatic shift in the industrial sectors, whose penetration of export markets from the United Kingdom, particularly in big projects, are most successfully represented by UK firms.

In 1994, when I was on the South American mission, the power generating sector was by far the most represented, but it hardly features today. Business today

is vastly more fluid in its ability to transfer sourcing. It is easy for the telecoms sector to switch production from one country to another, and the cost of credit is invariably the differentiator. The Italians and French now have the edge in the power generating sector compared with five years ago, but the UK has a strong position in the aircraft, aerospace and defence sectors and we want to ensure that that position is maintained. Who knows what will happen in the next five years? We could have the edge in satellites and robotics. We do not know. That shift in the market and the background to it must be addressed and accepted.

Another myth is that the ECGD should focus more of its support on small and medium-sized enterprises. That aim is admirable and laudable, but it displays a lack of understanding of the dynamics of the industrial value-added chain. I would argue, as does the British Exporters Association—this addresses a point made by the Chairman of the Select Committee—that the needs of SMEs are met through their role as sub-contractors to prime UK contractors, and such "primes" will front the relationship with the ECGD. Therefore, although the ECGD is supporting SME exports, the data is not recorded. Indeed, I doubt whether there is sufficient business for SMEs to act as prime contractors in their own right. The banks would not welcome such business—the ECGD would doubtless be keen to take note of the lead given by banks in this respect—given the fixed costs associated with undertaking ECGD business, irrespective of contract size.

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): They would say that, wouldn't they?

Mr. O'Brien: Indeed. The Minister says, "They would say that, wouldn't they"—in a Mandy Rice-Davis sort of way—and we must accept that there will be a tension. It is a marketplace, and the boundary that will determine where the Government should step in is not permanent. It is a wavy line, and we accept that bankers are always going to push it to their advantage. However, SMEs benefit greatly from being sub-contractors to prime contractors. The accusation that the ECGD exists purely to support a few defence and aerospace companies is unfair.

Mr. O'Neill: The point that I was trying to make was that the degree of risk in many defence contracts is not as great as some would have us believe. There is a displacement effect, and access to facilities is denied to a cash-limited organisation such as the ECA. Therefore, it is unable to provide full assistance because it occasionally supports defence contracts that might not need support, but which have always received it and expect to get it.

Mr. O'Brien: I certainly accept that point. To be frank, there is also a politico-commercial point. To some extent, the ECGD—albeit as an arm's length agency—ties the Government into relationships in that sector. As a result, the confidence of all parties involved is affected. I accept that there is a capacity issue, but it is a moot point whether, if released, it would be taken by SMEs, given the fixed cost base and the way in which bankers operate.

I have thought carefully about the purpose of the ECGD, and we are faced with a conundrum. I recently received an e-mail from a banker on this subject. Although, as the Minister said, we must take such comments with a market pinch of salt, we should nevertheless note them. The banker said that his clients need a clearer steer on ECGD support when bidding for projects. At present, clients can be frustrated to discover that the whole evaluation process may turn into a farce, as they see it. As a result, they have no idea where they stand. Even a "yes" would be a start, subject to the ECGD being comfortable about environmental and productive issues, but that would not help a UK exporter who needed to submit a committed tender by a specific date. The conundrum is that we want the ECGD almost exclusively to support UK exporters, but the Treasury—quite understandably—wants to mitigate the risk and potential loss on the taxpayers' behalf.

Without modernisation and appropriate facilities in this Chamber I am unable to make a Powerpoint presentation, which would allow me to explain this matter by referring to a traditional, bell-shaped graph. The ECGD has traditionally taken the risk portion that is positioned at the far right-hand side of the bell graph. However, the Treasury is pushing the ECGD to consider spreading its risk portfolio into the larger part of the bell, which is currently occupied by others. Is that the right way to proceed?

I can see that the Treasury might like to increase its activity in those lower risk areas, by spreading its pool of risk. There is a perfectly normal insurance-based argument for lessening risk by participating in a broader pool. However, apart from the underlying philosophical argument, one must ask why it should be necessary to stray into an area that is already pretty well served by the private sector—by the banks, the insurance market or the bond issuers. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, there is an underlying Treasury subsidy, which could represent unfair competition in that market, as ECGD could try to move into the relevant sphere of business. The ECGD should remain in the sphere of activity in which it is most likely to add value. That is, by definition, the most uncommercial area, with the highest risk for the longest term. That would be in the national interest.

I want to comment on another aspect of the matter, wearing my very small hat as vice-chairman of the all-party Jubilee 2000 group, which works on promoting the relief of third-world debt—very often in the same countries as those involved in contracts covered by ECGD. A third-world Government may be reluctant to renege on a sovereign-to-sovereign debt. A real issue arises about the Government's role. Arguments may have taken place in the past about whether the whole of ECGD should be privatised, but a fair counter-argument is that sovereign-to-sovereign debt has a greater power to focus the minds of those who might renege than would the prospect of letting down private banks. That is relevant to the operation of the ECGD, and possibly a justification of Treasury subsidy.

I emphasise that the ECGD should focus on its job as a funder and insurer of last resort for the highest risk projects, in support of UK exporters. It is the role of other arms of Government to put constraints on its activities. It should not become the policeman, in place of other departmental responsibilities. A temptation has

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arisen—and I note an example from what I believe to be the draft Liberal Democrat manifesto—to promise to end

subsidies for arms sold to foreign regimes by ending the practice of the Export Credit Guarantee Department using British taxpayers' money to support arms exports.

That is misplaced with regard to the ECGD, and is relevant to the proper operation of the export licensing system and the determination of public policy through the normal governmental arms and Departments.

A major concern, even in the Government's response to the Select Committee report, is that confusion exists on this issue. The confusion is about whether we are considering a funding and insurance arm of Government, which is in the national interest, or a role in addition to that as policeman and watchdog, whether operating uniquely or in partnership with other Departments. The Department should not need to perform that role if all the other Departments and mechanisms of government are established.

Mr. Butterfill: Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be curious if we were prevented from selling arms to a democratically elected Government who were threatened by internal revolution or external aggression? Surely at the very least we should want to protect democratically elected and responsible Governments?

Mr. O'Brien: We would all probably consider it unobjectionable, subject to the particular circumstances, to try to assist democratic countries that wanted to uphold democratic rights by way of the normal defence arrangements. I hope that those criteria are not exceptional.

Dr. Cable: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, although it is often correct to supply arms to a democratic Government seeking to defend themselves, as the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) suggested, that is different from incurring risk and, implicitly, loss on behalf of the British Exchequer by providing export credit guarantees? The university of York computed figures for the Defence Committee suggesting that the cumulative losses incurred on defence contracts in the past were about £200 million a year.

Mr. O'Brien: I do not know of those figures. The right way forward is to ensure that our industries have proper support to access markets wherever they are available. Objections to arms sales should be dealt with through the export licensing arrangements. The hon. Gentleman mentioned a cumulative loss to the British taxpayer in a particular sector. Again, we should consider the operation of the licensing programme.

The experts and operators in the ECGD are supposed to have greatest expertise on funding and insurable issues, rather than on the political criteria used in the exercise of public policy, which is, quite properly, the responsibility of the DTI though the licensing system. I dare say that the Minister will refer to that.

Dr. Tonge: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I accept his argument that the ECGD should not have any involvement other than to back up the loan in arms sales. Does he agree that other Departments have little control over where this country puts its money? The Ilisu dam case will not go through the arms export control mechanism, so there must be some controls when we grant ECGDs.

Mr. O'Brien: I suspect that we must let the issue rest, because some parties want strongly to link the operation of the ECGD with political issues. My argument, which I hope I have made clear, is that the ECGD should be more the tool of UK exporters. The Government have other and better opportunities for ensuring that public policy is exercised in the fields to which the hon. Lady referred.

It is impressive and right that the British Exporters Association endorses the principles, rather than the mechanisms, behind concerns for the environment, human rights and the wider agenda. However, it is felt that there are other and better arms of Government to deal with them.

I think and hope that competitiveness is the common ground between us. As the Chairman of the Select Committee said, there must be a worldwide approach. We must have engagement with international bodies, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West mentioned, or at least within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, so as to maintain—in the time-honoured but critical phrase to all business—a level playing field. UK exporters would not want the country to take such a lead and be so far out in front that it did itself damage. However, it is perfectly laudable and right that the UK should not only keep pace, but be a pace setter.

Whatever happens, it is the Government's and Parliament's role, through the Select Committees, to ensure that there is a reality check and that we do not deliberately take a stance that damages the UK's competitiveness. Many people live on this small island, so they must be able to maintain an essential manufacturing base. If the ECGD were less competitive, multinational companies would switch supply away from the UK, which would be regrettable and is to be avoided.

I referred to third-world debt relief. Debt forgiveness programmes should be limited to amounts that can be written off by the Government; they should not include amounts owing to UK exporters that are not insured. That is very much a banker's perspective, but it is a realistic approach. It is, quite properly, open to debate as a matter of policy by Members of Parliament. It could provide a means of securing agreement among international bodies, and could further an all-party approach to promoting debt relief.

It is proposed that ECGD becomes capitalised. How much capital would it be allowed? Would it be enough to cater for its on-going requirements? Given the difference between the capital allocation allowed for France and for Iran—I employ a typical banker's model—what will be the capital allocation for ECGD? One fears that ECGD will be behind rather than in front of the game in that respect, because the private sector has already been there. The issue is particularly pertinent in view of light aircraft and defence projects in the current arena.

One should not forget that UK exporters enormously value advice from commercial banks on structuring expertise, local buyer country intelligence and

associated commercial loans. If the ECGD were to enter into this field—beyond the wavy curve, to return to an earlier pictorial description—would all that be available as part of the package? UK exporters want to ensure that the ECGD's aim for transparency does not conflict with their undertakings of commercial confidentiality.

Will the Minister explain whether, if the ECGD is capitalised, the Treasury will allow it to have delegated authority to conduct business as it sees fit? The ECGD needs to refer projects to the Treasury when the underlying risk is below investment grade. Many observers believe that if the ECGD were permitted to decide internally on applications for risk down as far as BB level, it would cover the majority of ECGD business and would therefore confer the independence and autonomy that it requires.

I intended to explore the issue of risk return, but it was dealt with earlier. In conclusion, although all institutions must move within the markets, within the terms of public policy and within the mandates of Governments, I do not believe that the ECGD can or should change unilaterally without reference to other export credit agencies around the world. It would be wrong to introduce major changes without considering all the issues. The Select Committee report has provided a good steer, but more substantive responses from the Government would be helpful. Thus far they have provided only a short response.

I hope that the Government will reflect on my arguments and that their watchwords will be that the ECGD should focus, above all else, on areas where it adds value in the high-risk, high-tenor market. If it is granted proper autonomy, it should have the flexibility to respond in a proper, market-sensitive way in the best interests of UK exporters.

3.49 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): We have had a good debate which may even have seemed exciting to anyone who left accountancy, as I did, because it was too exciting.

The ECGD's document and the Secretary of State's foreword to it give the impression that the review was forced on the Government by rules set by the next steps initiative, which required all Departments to review their status every five years. Ministers seemed to have no desire or motivation for the review and no agenda that they wanted to pursue. There are many words in the document, but little desire is expressed to move things on. Ministers appear only to have gone through the motions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) said, the ECGD performs an important role for industry and commerce. The insurance of export risk is an important business for Britain, which has a history as a great trading nation. It is also an important element of business in the City of London.

As the Select Committee states, the ECGD, set up in 1919, was the world's first export credit agency. Since then, there have been huge changes in the capital markets of the world, especially in the past 20 years. That is why, as the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) said, in 1991 the previous Government privatised the short-term credit insurance arm of the ECGD, which was acquired by the Dutch company, NCM Credit Management Worldwide. That company has expanded the business in a colossal way since 1991. According to the evidence to the Select Committee, in the United Kingdom alone it insures about £30 billion of business annually against the risk of non-payment. That compares with the ECGD's £3 billion of annual risk insured. Of course, there is a huge difference between the short-term risk undertaken in the private sector and the longer-term risk in more difficult territories undertaken by the ECGD.

Since the privatisation of short-term risk in 1991, the private sector has developed enormously and responded well to the new opportunities that the privatisation afforded them. The disappointment with the review is that it fails to take into account, or even to refer to, the developments. In the past few years, there have been considerable, almost seismic, changes in the world's capital market with new technologies, innovative products and better forms of communication. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) said, there are political risks in a number of countries. That might be a sovereign debt risk or the risk of confiscation of assets by the regime—following the windfall tax on utilities, that is a risk that some American investors believe applies in Britain under a Labour Government. That aside, political risk can also involve a restriction on exchange controls and on taking money out of the country once it has been invested. As far as certain countries are concerned, such risks are beyond the scope of the private sector at a price that would be commercially viable.

There is, however, a swathe of business that lies between the short-term risk and high political sovereign risk which the private sector could adequately take on and which it may be able to do more cheaply and more innovatively than the ECGD. It could certainly do so more speedily than the ECGD does at present.

Having said that, there are some encouraging words in the review. Paragraph 1.31 states:

> An ECGD should rigorously scrutinise any opportunities for contracting out functions, particularly any new functions to assess whether this would represent value for money and bring an improvement in service delivery.

Later, the report states:

> The ECGD should build on its success of working with and complementing the commercial banking and insurance sector. ECGD should build on the success of the privatisation of its short-term business.

The report continues:

> The ECGD should use the private market to manage risks through active Treasury management using hedging, capital markets and reinsurance instruments where this is cost-effective.

These are interesting words, but they lack substance.

The Government's response to the Select Committee report was a little more forthcoming. It said that

> the Government accepts that it is not in the UK's economic interest for ECGD to compete with the private sector, but in order to maximise private sector capacity to take on risk, it should be in its interest to take on more of what ECGD does. ECGD should continue to work in partnership with private sector providers and should seek to fill gaps only where there is a genuine market failure and where it makes economic sense to intervene.

Paragraph 20 of the Select Committee report seems to show that that market failure relates principally to defence sector exports. The free market seems to have

[Mr. Nick Gibb]

less appetite for arms export than the state—something on which the left might wish to ponder. That paragraph is a key statement of Government policy. The question remains whether that intention will be delivered.

NCM, a major player in this market, wrote to the Secretary of State on 9 August. The letter says:

> We were disappointed to receive from ECGD a letter...which indicated that whilst ECGD would be ready to work with the private sector on such projects Ministers had decided that it would be better to do that after substantial progress had been made on ECGD's agenda for change.
>
> We continue to believe that there is a real and valuable contribution that the private sector can make to ECGD business. We do not believe that this will happen unless ECGD both encourages the private sector and makes room for the private sector to grow. None of this will even begin to happen unless ECGD begins a dialogue with the private sector and from what ECGD has said to us that appears unlikely to happen for some considerable time.

There is a concern and a suspicion that there is an element of empire protection within the ECGD and that key officials are dragging their feet in opening up more work for the private sector. An answer to that would be most welcome. Will the Minister also answer my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West, who asked what progress had been made by the ECGD in doing more with the private sector, particularly on the reinsurance front?

Will the Minister also expand on the capitalisation framework referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury, the key element of which he intends to put in place by April next year? The review document says:

> ECGD is also aiming to have formulated by April 2001 the policy framework for a full capitalisation system to be introduced by April 2002 including the establishment of a trading fund.

The footnote says that the key characteristic of a trading fund is that it operates outside the vote system. Will the Minister say a little more about that and what safeguards there are to ensure that high-risk trading ventures are not undertaken at a possible loss to the taxpayer?

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) pointed out that if the ECGD were required to return 6 per cent. on its capital—the same point is made by Samuel Brittan in a series of articles although he refers to a return of 8 per cent.—the break-even position would represent a loss. I should be interested to know how that matter is being addressed by the resource accounting process. Perhaps the Minister could address that, too.

Paragraph 22 of the Select Committee report refers to the recent losses incurred by the ECGD arising from business in south-east Asia and Russia. It says:

> There is a question to be addressed concerning the time scale over which ECGD's break-even objective should be mentioned. Under WTO guidelines there is no definition of the time scale.

Has any member of the WTO complained about these losses?

Finally, the review document is very glossy. It is full of fine words and sentiments but it lacks the bold initiative to create a truly modern ECGD regime that Britain, the world's second largest overseas investor and the fourth largest economy, deserves. The question we must now ask is whether the words will be followed by the kind of action they imply. I am sorry to say that the evidence to date is that they will not.

3.59 pm

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): If I may say so, I thought that the end of that speech from the official Opposition was slightly disingenuous.

I accept genuine criticism about the delay that has occurred since January, when the report was submitted after the consultations finished at the end of last year. It took us until July to produce our response. It has not been easy. There have been wide-ranging discussions, as we wanted to ensure that all views were taken on board. To that end, we have also consulted other Departments. This is not only an ECGD document, but one that concerns the Government more generally. Many of the points raised in this debate, in the Select Committee and through other representations needed serious consideration to see how we should move the ECA forward.

We are grateful to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry for producing its report in January. It has helped us to clarify some of the points raised in the contributions to the consultation. It was a well-informed and timely contribution to the review of the ECGD's mission and status, and I believe that we have taken into account all the Committee's concerns in the review report that was laid before the House on 25 July. I shall deal at the end of my speech with any points that I have not covered, and any hon. Members who then wish to respond may do so if they can catch your eye, Mr. O'Hara.

When the Secretary of State and I launched the ECGD review in July 1999, we were aware that it played an important role in underwriting between £3.5 billion and £4 billion-worth of UK exports and overseas investment each year. The figure fluctuates each year; I believe that last year it was about £5 billion, and slightly less the year before. We saw the review of the ECGD's mission as an important opportunity—contrary to what the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) suggested—to take a fundamental look at what the ECGD's role should be, and to make sure that it is ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century, of which there are many.

We particularly wanted to take a fresh look at the relationship between the ECGD's trade facilitation activities and the Government's wider international objectives. I should like to put that into context. British Trade International has been mentioned this afternoon. That represents a significant step taken by the Government to bring together for the first time the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department of Trade and Industry to work together for UK export promotion and development. We have put an effective system in place, although I shall not go into details. It forms part of the bigger picture, in which the Government are trying to provide United Kingdom exporters with the best possible service. This is not an afterthought or a bolt-on. It is part of the integral approach that we have taken by providing good facilities to our exporters.

The ECGD covers about 3 per cent. of total exports from the United Kingdom. It is a financial facility to assist our exporters in the more difficult markets—their

activities represent about 3 per cent. of total exports, and, as the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton mentioned, involve about 20 per cent. of capital goods, which is also significant. However, let us keep our eye on the bigger picture, which is the percentage of the United Kingdom's total export goods.

British Trade International is the holding company for Trade Partners UK and Invest UK—the two bodies that make up BTI. We are trying to increase our exports by increasing those services to UK exporters. It is significant that every 1 per cent. increase in exports contributes just under £2 billion to the UK economy. We therefore take these matters very seriously. Contrary to what the hon. Gentleman was saying about our being forced into this position, we have made this an integral part of our service to UK exporters.

We also want to consider how we should balance the benefits of ECGD support against risks to the taxpayer. We must do that, as a responsible Government. Although there have been major studies of the ECGD's role in the past, none has been quite so wide ranging or attracted so much public attention as this review.

The Select Committee on International Development has also taken a close interest in the ECGD's role in relation to developing countries, and rightly so. There was public consultation, which took views from the ECGD's customers and other interested parties. A number of supporting studies were also carried out and published alongside the mission and status review, some of which have been mentioned during the debate.

The ECGD worked closely on the review with officials from other Departments. I pay tribute to the quality of the staff at the ECGD, especially to Marion Maddox and her team, who have produced a piece of quality work that will set the framework for several years to come.

I welcome scrutiny of the ECGD's role. Over the past year or so, it has faced intense criticism from some quarters, much of which is not well founded and gives little acknowledgement of the benefits that the ECGD can bring—not only to the UK's economy in the form of jobs for many thousands of firms in the supply chain, but to overseas countries that would not get much-needed investment were it not for the ECAs.

I am determined to tackle the perception that the ECGD is a force for evil, because I believe that it is a force for good. In taking that argument on, we want to shine a strong searchlight on the ECGD's operations to make it more transparent and to publish much more information, so that the full story is there for people to see. I accept that only a few people understand export credit guarantees. In the mid-1990s, when I had the privilege of chairing the Trade and Industry Committee, we considered the whole question of ECGs. It is a technical matter, but it need not be regarded as such. It is a facility to aid British exports, and that is how it should be regarded in the public domain. We must talk in lay persons' language, rather than jargon, so that people understand.

The ECGD is rightly praised by business for being one of the most innovative and flexible ECAs, but it needs to reform and modernise. That problem was tackled by the mission and status review. We need to make changes in key areas, many of which were usefully highlighted in the Committee's report. The review was published before the recess. It sets out 38 conclusions representing a wide-ranging agenda for change, all of which the Government have accepted.

I shall run through some of the key features of the new direction that we have set for the ECGD. First, on the ECGD's core purpose, the new mission statement confirms that it should continue to provide insurance cover and guarantees to help UK exporters to win business and UK firms to invest overseas, bringing benefits to the UK economy. That is significant, because there was a big debate in the Treasury about whether that facility is necessary. The case had to be argued, was argued forcefully, and has now been accepted across the board.

The review confirmed that the private market is not consistently able to take on medium and long-term risk in non-OECD markets. UK firms also need to compete effectively against exporters from other countries supported by Government-backed ECAs.

In reality, ECAs represent an artificial market on which there are controls, such as those imposed by the World Trade Organisation, which are more refined in the OECD countries. That artificial market is subsidised in various ways, for which there must be ground rules. If we did not have it, many developments around the world would not happen. We must co-operate to ensure transparency and a level playing field. That is what we are attempting to do through the review and our role in international institutions.

There is a clear business case for the Government to continue to intervene to fill the gap in the marketplace. However, we also want to encourage the private market to develop so that the ECGD can continue to explore ways of getting it to share risk and expand its appetite for non-OECD medium and long-term risks. We will establish that dialogue over the next 18 months to two years, as we put in place the fundamental changes that will be brought about by the new mission and status review.

Mr. Gibb: Would it be possible to start the process a little sooner so that the private sector can work with the ECGD earlier, without waiting 18 months to two years?

Mr. Caborn: The hon. Gentleman says that we are dragging our feet, but that is not so. We have held a series of discussions with the private sector but, before entering detailed discussions, we want to resolve the funding arrangements with the Treasury so that we know the outcome of the mission statement. It is not right to enter those detailed discussions at the moment.

The private sector will not be able to use the state as a lender of last resort, but will have to take the risk, as it did with short-term risk. However, the Government want to work in partnership with the private sector. As I develop my speech and explain how the mission statement will be implemented, it will become clear that it is important to put some matters in place before entering detailed discussions with the private sector.

The second key issue is that a new risk management framework will be introduced. Taxpayers must be confident that the ECGD will continue to operate on a break-even basis with strong risk management discipline and appropriate financial objectives. As the Trade and Industry Committee said, the ECGD's

[Mr. Caborn]

financial performance must be measured over a long period, but there has been much confusion about that. Its financial performance has been positive for business underwritten since it privatised its short-term operations in 1991. Few realise that it is a substantial contributor to the Exchequer. It has recovered much of the money that it paid out in claims on pre-1991 business from countries that have been able to pay their debts, and has written off large amounts owed by the poorest countries with great debt.

We have agreed that a strengthened risk management system should be introduced. That arose from the KPMG report, to which the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West referred, and its positive recommendations. A capitalised framework will be introduced, and the ECGD will move towards operating its business under a trading fund. That should enable the ECGD to have operational autonomy in making its risk decisions, allowing the Treasury to pursue the role of strategic oversight. That should address a number of the concerns that the Committee rightly expressed.

Mr. Butterfill: When is that process likely to be achieved?

Mr. Caborn: Discussions are going on now with the Treasury, and we have laid out the principles in the mission statement. The Treasury would like us to introduce the process sooner rather than later, and we want some steps to be taken before 1 April 2001 with completion by 2002. It is important that discussions with the Treasury are completed as quickly as possible.

There is a genuine desire to ensure that what we agree with the Treasury and other Departments will work. They see the advantage of an effective ECGD that can play a role not only in the United Kingdom but in the international community. I hope that we can resolve the issues with the Treasury sooner rather than later, with a move towards the establishment of a fund in 2001 and completion by 2002.

I know that business is concerned that the new framework may constrain the ECGD further and make its services uncompetitive with other export agencies. That was referred to during our discussions, particularly those with the Treasury. I assure this Chamber and business representatives that the ECGD's overall risk appetite and financial objectives will remain broadly the same. The ECGD will not be required to charge its customers higher premium rates to pay a return for the use of Government capital. To do so would be stupid, and would take the ECGD out of the marketplace. If it becomes too expensive for our people to export, they will be put at a disadvantage.

We need a sensible arrangement with the Treasury, and we must ensure that there is a level playing field in relation to other export agencies. We must not tie one hand behind the ECGD's back. I understand the concerns expressed by business, and I give an assurance that the arrangements will be broadly the same. That should give comfort to those operating in the export market.

The third major change in the ECGD's new mission statement makes it explicitly clear that its support for projects must take into account the Government's wider international policies, including those relating to sustainable development, human rights, good governance and trade. The ECGD is currently consulting on a draft statement of business principles—taking a leaf out of the Commonwealth Development Corporation's book—which will guide business practice under the new mission statement. The business principles will cover matters such as openness, debt sustainability, human rights, sustainable development, corporate governance and business integrity.

Those principles will be published and regularly reviewed, so that customers and other interested parties will know where the ECGD stands. They will answer some of the questions that were posed this afternoon, and about which business is a little confused. Business is being consulted on the mission statement, which will embody those principles, and as a result there will be greater certainty.

Dr. Tonge: Will there be monitoring and assessment to ensure that firms stick to those business principles?

Mr. Caborn: If the hon. Lady had waited for my next sentence, her question would have been answered. From 2001, the ECGD's annual report to Parliament will cover its performance against the business principles, as well as its financial outturn. All hon. Members will have access to that report, as will the general public. It will be up to the parliamentary authorities to decide whether the report should be debated in the House or scrutinised by the Trade and Industry Committee, and we will provide the relevant information if it is needed.

This is a major step forward. It is right that the ECGD should promote the Government's policies more actively, and in ways that are consistent with its core aim. It should also use its leverage to support projects that are economically sound and to promote the Government's international policies. I do not pretend that such principles will always be easy to apply, and the issues relating to individual cases will need to be balanced very carefully. I am also conscious of the need to ensure that UK firms are not put at a competitive disadvantage by being burdened with unnecessary processes and additional costs.

I am delighted that the ECGD has taken steps to boost its expertise by appointing an adviser on business principles. The adviser has worked on this subject with the Commonwealth Development Corporation, and therefore brings relevant experience. Although I am sure that the policy is right and very much in tune with the responsible approach that many major firms currently take, I understand and share the concern of business that the ECGD's policy and process for handling sensitive cases should not get ahead of other ECAs. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and I want the ECGD to compete with the best of other ECAs and set an ambitious agenda for multilateral reform, so that our exporters are able to compete on a level footing.

I shall briefly list some other changes through which the ECGD will try to strengthen its operations. Yesterday, I announced a package of improvements to the ECGD's products for SMEs. That is the start of a campaign to widen the ECGD's customer base, working in conjunction with British Trade International, the Small Business Service and the regional development

agencies to spread the message to the regions. I hope that smaller companies will react positively to this initiative.

The ECGD should offer support to as many exporters in as many industrial sectors as possible—provided that the ECGD, rather than private sector insurance, is appropriate. Although the ECGD is often perceived as helping only a handful of big companies—a perception that we have heard again this afternoon—many smaller exporters already benefit from direct support from the ECGD. For example, in the past month the ECGD announced that it had supported a small firm called Gall Thomson, from Great Yarmouth, which sold an order of anti-pollution equipment for Mexico worth $740,000. That is not a big order for the ECGD. The body also supports Angloco Limited from Batley in Yorkshire, which last year won the "Best Exporting Company" title in British Trade International's export awards for smaller businesses for a £2.5 million order of firefighting equipment for the Government of Barbados.

The ECGD is important to the medium-sized company, although perhaps not vastly so in the scale of things. I have recently returned from Aberdeen, where I visited people from British Petroleum—350 small and medium-sized supply companies for that organisation are trying to strengthen their supply chain. Clearly, those SMEs are seeking additional opportunities in markets in which they operate in conjunction with the bigger contractors. The agency could assist them in that regard, although I agree that the biggest support for companies of that type will be the supply chain. However, it is our duty to make the facility more sensitive and user-friendly to those companies, if we can.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: What the Minister said begs a question that he may not be able to answer today, but perhaps the answer could be injected into the review. As part of the encouragement given to small and medium-sized businesses, might a regime of differential pricing be contemplated?

Mr. Caborn: I do not know about differential pricing, although it is something that we could consider. We are considering introducing differential procedures so that, when a £500 million facility is being covered for a big contractor compared to one of £2.5 million, the same criteria—or, rather, the same procedures—are not applied. Procedures can be moved quickly, as they often need to be. For the first time in a long time, we are going through the various organs serving small and medium-sized companies such as the Small Business Service and the regional development agencies and encouraging them to be proactive in terms of that new facility.

I want more exporters to be helped in the way that I have described. That will provide additional material support for them as they struggle to overcome immense social problems by allowing them limited resources. The ECGD will consider its product range again and encourage overseas multinationals and buyers to source from the United Kingdom.

To modernise its service delivery, the ECGD will be doing more to develop its e-business functions and strengthen its service standards. By working with the Department for International Development and others, the ECGD should also be able to play a more prominent and positive part in the poverty reduction and sustainable development programmes of the poorer developing countries. It will continue to play a central role in implementing international and national debt forgiveness policies, including the United Kingdom's unilateral 100 per cent. debt relief policy, which the Chancellor announced last December. Officials from the ECGD were helpful in the Paris Club in bringing me their technical expertise and ensuring that the programme progressed. Sometimes, it is not acknowledged that we use the expertise of those officials to assist in the development of the third world.

In March, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced that the ECGD would not seek any further payments from Mauritania, which was the first country to be given relief under the United Kingdom scheme. Since then, a further nine countries have qualified for United Kingdom relief: Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Mozambique, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda. That brings total United Kingdom relief to those 10 countries to $750 million.

The ECGD is committed to writing off more than $1 billion of debt owed by the heavily indebted poor countries by the end of the year. That will have a two-fold benefit. First, it will underpin the efforts of those countries to achieve economic sustainability. Secondly, it will provide additional material support for them as they struggle to overcome immense social problems by allowing limited resources to be diverted from debt servicing to health care, education and similar poverty relief measures.

To put the matter in the context of our wider approach to trade, we have argued forcefully in the European Union that the heavily indebted poor countries, which represent less than 1 per cent. of world trade, should have tariff-free and quota-free access to the European markets. That suggestion has been accepted. One of the major subjects for discussion at the World Trade Organisation in Seattle was how we could bring into play the poor countries to ensure that they had access to the developed world's markets.

As we reduce the debt, conditions are attached. The new resources go to health, education and the development of those countries' economies. Part of the virtuous circle will be for the goods and services from those countries to enjoy quota-free and duty-free access to the developed world's market. That is a sustainable virtuous circle for those developing economies.

Once debt relief has provided a new basis from which those countries can move forward, the focus will turn to the provision of new ECGD support. Of course, when considering what new credits to offer to countries that are emerging from indebtedness, ECGD's focus will be on debt sustainability. It is in no one's interest to recreate the old debt problems that we inherited, which collectively, we are trying to resolve.

Dr. Tonge: The Minister is generous in giving way. He may not be able to answer my question now, but perhaps he will write to me. Uganda has achieved completion point for debt relief and presumably has now had all its debt wiped out, including the ECGD's.

[Dr. Tonge]

At what point will it be considered for more ECGs? I understand that the Bugagali project to replace the Jinja dam would probably qualify for such a grant.

Mr. Caborn: If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I shall deal with that.

The ECGD announced at a recent seminar—held jointly with the Department for International Development and attended by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, exporters, representatives of overseas Governments and NGOs—that it was to use Uganda as a pilot for the new more proactive approach to which I referred. The ECGD will try to identify Uganda's needs, collectively with the various stakeholders there and put together cover packages in a way that is consistent with the development plans for the country. There will be a requirement not to recreate an unsustainable debt burden.

As a practical example of what can be achieved, I recently announced an aluminium smelting project in Mozambique. It is producing metal six months ahead of the scheduled dates, which shows how the ECGD overseas investment insurance can help poor countries to develop their economies.

It has always been possible to perceive the ECGD as a force for evil, because it has been depicted as having a role in the arms race. Now we can cite many instances of its being a force for good, without which countries such as Uganda and Mozambique would not be able to proceed with the development of their economies, which leads to a win-win situation in the development of the trading regimes that we want.

The ECGD does not normally support defence sales to the poorest and most indebted countries. Priority is given to exports that support economic and social recovery and the development of the country. On 11 January, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer extended the ban on the use of export credits for non-productive expenditure to 63 countries. The United Kingdom already leads the way with its productive expenditure policy and we shall work towards bringing other countries into line with our position. We have been working within international organisations to ensure that our policies will be accepted across the international community. Bit by bit, we are moving into that arena.

Some people are genuinely critical of past support for poor, especially HIPC, countries when it has been a race to the bottom. That can be stopped only if there are international standards to which we all subscribe and apply. Via the World Trade Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, we are building a framework for operation that is gradually being accepted by all the major countries that are developing ECAs. I am proud to say that the UK has been in the lead. I was involved a few months ago with the OECD on the development of multinational co-operation on anti-bribery measures.

I shall return to the Ilisu dam in more detail later. The five criteria that we set out were in line with the OECD's internationally agreed criteria. As I said, little by little,we are creating a framework whereby we can stop the race to the bottom and use the facilities in the most creative and productive way. That represents a win-win situation.

On ECGD support for defence exports, let me make it clear that it has always operated in line with Government policy—providing cover only where appropriate licences have been issued and remain valid. It will continue to do so. Strengthened Government arrangements are also being introduced. The role of the Export Guarantee Advisory Council is being radically reformed, so that it advises the ECGD on the policies and procedures needed to fulfil the new mission—not on individual risk decisions. Outside directors will also be appointed to strengthen the ECGD's management board.

On the perception that ECGD is secretive, I spoke earlier about it reporting its performance against business principles. It will be improving its transparency by publishing more information about its operations, processes and systems, while respecting the legitimate confidence of its customers and other parties to commercial transactions. The ECGD is also undertaking more consultation with customers and other parties that have an interest in what it does. It will collect and publish more information on the benefits that it provides to the UK economy and UK firms in the supply chain, as well as the benefits for developing countries.

All that is important and I have started writing to all Back Benchers. When the ECGD has been involved in orders, a letter is sent from my Department, setting out the details of the order and what jobs are developing. The same applies to specialist groups of Back Benchers as well as Government groups. We want people to understand the ECGD's role in the 21st century. The drive to greater openness should serve to shine a strong searchlight on its operations.

I shall attempt to answer some specific questions. First, I was asked about the Ilisu dam. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear on 22 December, several conditions—relating to resettlement, water flow, water quality and the preservation of cultural heritage—will need to be satisfied before any decision to provide ECGD support can be taken. That remains the case today. Those conditions, particularly on resettlement, will be measured against OECD criteria.

We should remember that Turkey was a founder member of the OECD and was party to the codes that were laid down. We should also remember that Turkey wants to accede to the European Union and that it uses only 15 per cent. of the power used by some other member states. One area of the country is very poor. Resettlement must conform to international standards. Displacement will take place, but the figures vary. We should also recognise that 5 million people could gain from this type of development. The Swiss are the lead credit agency. If we walk away from the problem, it will not resolve the power deficit problem of that mission. Our position is clear. As long as the project conforms to international standards and Turkey accepts that, it is the right way to move forward.

It can seem arrogant for people to tell others what they should or should not do in respect of their development. Our involvement comes at a price—that

standards are agreed internationally. This country would be worse off without its dams, but they were constructed many years ago. Countries are at different stages of development. We must be careful not to be too arrogant, saying that we know better than everyone else so our standards should always prevail. Five criteria must be met and the standards have been agreed to international levels. It will be a transparent process. We shall measure the criteria and take our decision.

Mr. Butterfill: Can the Minister throw any light on correspondence between his Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office? I asked about the apparent readiness of his Secretary of State to release it and the reluctance of the Foreign Office to do so.

Mr. Caborn: Yes, I can. There is no disagreement between us and the Foreign Office: we are at one. We are part of joined-up government and we move in concert after wide consultation. We have not agreed to release the correspondence between the Foreign Office and the ECGD. We are in agreement with the Foreign Office that the Government response should answer concerns about its role. I do not know what papers the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) has been reading.

Mr. Butterfill: I thought that the Minister believed in open government.

Mr. Caborn: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are an open Government. He has been in government and he knows how Governments operate. When there are discussions between two Departments, the decision is open to scrutiny, examination and challenge. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, however, we do not put the ministerial correspondence into the public domain. That would not be in the interests of good government. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that probably better than most here this afternoon.

The blue stream gas project from Russia to Turkey involves $120 million of UK goods and services. The problem has been with Russia, not Turkey. Moreover, it is not solely a UK project: Italy is involved. It is a consortium of ECAs and the Italians are the lead agency. I can write to hon. Members to give them more information about the problems if they wish. They have taken some time. Getting the ratings and some assessment of the credit risk for Russia has not been easy.

Mr. O'Neill: I am concerned that that was only the first such project. Are there any others in the pipeline and will the teething problems with this project enable us to move more quickly on future projects?

Mr. Caborn: I hope so. The regime in Russia has settled down somewhat. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been there this week. A number of people have been there to discuss how we can assist in reconstruction. We asked the ECGD officials to make a realistic assessment. That is what KPMG told them. They are doing so and are coming back to us. There has been a high political risk in Russia, which is probably settling down, and so I hope that the experience that we have gained from this scheme will assist us and make future decisions easier.

Mr. Butterfill: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way once more. As our Committee will shortly visit Turkey, it would be helpful if he confirmed that, although the project came in the category of good projects in difficult markets, Turkey is not considered a difficult market.

Mr. Caborn: Yes. Turkey is on cover. The rankings of those that receive ECGD cover are followed. The situation with the gas line has been slightly misinterpreted, because of the Russian end. We have considered a number of issues. There are housing schemes following the earthquake in Turkey, and we have been able to use facilities there.

The hon. Gentleman has just jogged my memory. We can help countries such as Turkey to improve their standards. Thames Water built a dam on the fault line in Turkey to standards above those asked. It did not breach in the earthquake and our civil engineers deserve credit, because they made a realistic assessment of the problems that could emerge with a fault line. They received support from the ECGD. Everyone commended the dam because it did not breach, which would have caused a terrible disaster. Such stories are never told in the papers or on television, but damn good projects by British engineers provide high-quality facilities around the world. We can be proud of that.

Mr. Butterfill: That is helpful, because we shall visit the earthquake zone as part of our task. The right hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that another good example of British engineering is the large silos designed by Mouchel and Partners, a British firm. They also survived the earthquake intact, whereas everything around them fell.

Mr. Caborn: One can only hope that the hon. Gentleman's comments and mine will be reported in the usual way through the press. He also asked about Treasury interference. I hope that negotiations will be completed and that the scheme will be fully operational by 2002.

Several hon. Members have mentioned reinsurance. I can only reiterate what we said in response to submissions. The UK led the way in privatising the ECGD's short-term credit business, subject to retaining a reinsurance role in a handful of markets. That success helped to develop the private credit insurance market, reducing contingent risk to the taxpayer without jeopardising UK export performance. The ECGD's report on the provision of its reinsurance for export sold on short payment terms is published alongside the mission and status review report. The Government have agreed that the ECGD should continue to provide short-term reinsurance, with the ultimate aim of helping the short-term export credit insurance market in the UK to be competitive and free standing without Government reinsurance.

The main conclusions of the reinsurance review are that the ECGD should eventually aim to withdraw from offering insurance for short-term business. Until demand ebbs away, the ECGD will carry on providing reinsurance as the insurer of last resort.

[Mr. Caborn]

The Chairman of the Select Committee asked whether fixed-rate export finance would be withdrawn. The scheme will not be withdrawn. However, in common with other countries, we are trying to eliminate such provision. That is the object of the exercise that has been agreed internationally. We are trying to withdraw subsidies, in line with international agreements and managing risk in accordance with the best commercial practices. The private sector should take on such work when it is possible. We want to ensure that there is a level playing field; therefore, the withdrawal will be with international agreement.

The Chairman of the Select Cttee mentioned environmental standards in an international context. The ECGD has continued to lead on such matters. We can be proud of this country's leading role in the international arena, especially in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development discussions to develop a framework for a common approach by ECAs to environmental issues.

It has been agreed that the ECGD should energetically pursue multinational negotiations to preserve the competitiveness of United Kingdom exporters. Significant progress has been made by the OECD working party on export credits and credit guarantees in the past 12 months towards fulfilling the mandate set by the OECD Ministers at the G8 Heads of Government meeting. An OECD action statement on the environment was agreed in February. We are setting the international agenda and leading with the best, although I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil said about being too far in front.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the cost to taxpayers. The ECGD breaks even—it is not regarded as having a subsidy—in accordance with OECD and World Trade Organisation requirements. Again, it is a matter of having a level playing field. The ECGD is not charged 6 per cent. or 7 per cent. on its returns, but that is agreed internationally by the WTO and the OECD, which lay out the framework in which the export credit agencies operate. If the ECGD were to be burdened with that charge, it would be uncompetitive compared with the other ECAs.

The ECGD has an obligation to break even in three years and, to date, has paid surplus moneys back to the Treasury. To prove the point on defence exports, it was said that we were losing about £230 million a year. That is not true. Having considered the ECGD overall claims payments in the period immediately after 1986—the recession—I believe that that assertion completely ignored the payments made subsequently against the loans and transactions. We continue to draw some of what was rescheduled back to the Exchequer. I suppose that in one respect the figures used were true, but if one looks at the bigger picture of the total contract and the money that is now coming into the United Kingdom, one sees that it is not true to say that we are losing £230 million a year.

I have covered most of the points that were raised. I thank the Select Committee for its report, which has helped us a lot. I hope that our mission statement will help a new ECGD to evolve that will play a significant part in exports and be fully integrated into the new procedures and structures. We should bear in mind that every 1 per cent. increase in exports from the United Kingdom is worth nearly £2 billion to the United Kingdom economy. We shall continue to modernise and keep under review everything that can be done to assist in that aim. We shall keep international standards for ECAs in mind and continue to take the lead in the international institutions.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eleven minutes to Five o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 23 October 2000

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Merseyside TEC

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the value for money of Merseyside TEC's annual contribution to Mersey Partnerships. [133813]

Mr. Wicks: Merseyside TEC is just one of a number of contributors to the Mersey Partnership. A membership forum, which includes Merseyside TEC, regularly meets to review the progress made by the Mersey Partnership on developing investment strategies and the promotion of and response to investment opportunities. We expect the TEC to judge the value of its contribution in the light of this evaluation of progress.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what accountability arrangements are in place to ensure the effective spending of the annual contribution of Merseyside TEC to Mersey Partnerships. [133814]

Mr. Wicks: The Government Office regularly reviews the overall performance of the TEC across the range of standards required by the TEC licensing framework. At the level of individual projects, we expect each TEC to have appropriate evaluation arrangements in place. In addition, Mersey Partnership is accountable to its member organisations for the proper and efficient use of contributions in accordance with the terms of reference of the Partnership.

School Trips (Transport)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will issue guidance to school governors on how to take account of parental concerns over transport hired for school trips; and if he will make a statement in respect of the written risk assessment requirement of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. [134147]

Jacqui Smith: The written risk assessment in question is contained in the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. Guidance to school governors and others on these matters is already available in "Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits: A Good Practice Guide" (Department for Education and Employment, published in 1998). 58,000 copies have been despatched to schools and other bodies, including the Library.

PGCE Training Courses

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students have switched from BEd degree courses to PGCE training courses following the introduction of training salaries; and if he will make a statement. [134153]

Ms Estelle Morris: BEd degrees are undergraduate courses and PGCE training courses are postgraduate. It is therefore unlikely that students will be in a position to switch from one to the other. If students are encouraged to switch to a PGCE route into teaching, in general they would choose not to apply for a BEd course, but take a three-year BA or BSc instead, followed by a PGCE. There will not be evidence of this for another three years.

The number of acceptances for BEd courses at UK higher education institutions starting in September 2000, at 10,397 was virtually the same as in September 1999, at 10,433. The number of acceptances for PGCE courses in England and Wales in September 2000 was 20,993, an increase of around 6 per cent. over last year's figure (19,768).

The Government announced on 30 March that £6,000 training salaries would be introduced for graduate trainees starting postgraduate initial teacher training courses from September 2000. New style "golden hello" incentives of £4,000 were announced for postgraduate trainees in mathematics, science, modern foreign languages, information technology and design and technology, who successfully complete their induction and go on to take up a relevant teaching post.

At the start of April 2000, applications to postgraduate teacher training courses in England and Wales were down by around 11 per cent. compared to the previous year (24,187 compared to 21,537). As a result of the announcement, they are up by around 5 per cent. overall (34,860 compared to 33,056), with particular increases in modern foreign languages (up 20 per cent—2,307 to 2,763) and technology (up 23 per cent.—1,619 to 1,996). The latest acceptance figures show these increases translating into higher acceptances into these shortage subjects.

Ofsted

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to raise the level of funding for Ofsted following its increased responsibilities in inspecting further education, introduced by the Learning and Skills Bill. [134102]

Ms Estelle Morris: The overall settlement provided by the Spending Review 2000 for Ofsted is £163 million in 2001–02, an increase of £56 million. This takes account of Ofsted's additional responsibilities, namely inspecting further education, introduced by the Learning and Skills Act 2000 and the regulation of child care, introduced by the Care Standards Act 2000 Ofsted will decide how to allocate its overall settlement across all the areas for which it is responsible.

Sure Start Budget

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of the Sure Start budget will derive from his Department. [134101]

Yvette Cooper: Sure Start budget is an addition to the Department for Education and Employment's expenditure limit, and the Secretary of State speaks for Sure Start in Cabinet. The money for Sure Start is carried on a separate Vote, and the Head of the Sure Start Unit reports to a cross-departmental steering group in respect of this expenditure. I am chair of this group.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Bishops

Mr. Baker: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, how many bishops there were in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 2000; what the average cost was of supporting a bishop in each of those years at 2000 prices; and what the ratio was of bishops to the average Sunday congregation in each year. [129656]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The numbers of full-time Diocesan, Suffragan and Assistant Bishops paid by the Church Commissioners in those and other recent years are as follows:

1970: 107

1980: 108

1990: 110

1998: 113

1999: 113

2000: 113.

The 1980 and subsequent figures include the two bishops in the Diocese in Europe, following the foundation of that diocese in that year. The 2000 figures include the three Provincial Episcopal Visitors, whose sees were created in the 1990s under the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod, following the decision to ordain women to the priesthood.

The Commissioners do not compile averages of expenditure on bishops because of a number of distorting factors, such as expenditure incurred on discharging national episcopal responsibilities, which would prevent like being compared with like. The total costs of the Church Commissioners' expenditure on bishops in the years in question, adjusted to 2000 prices by reference to the national average earnings index (earnings being the inflation index most appropriate for comparison) are set out. This total cost includes:

1. bishops' stipends (and pension contributions from 1998),
2. costs of running and staffing bishops' offices,
3. costs of maintaining See Houses which provide domestic accommodation for the bishop and his family as well as staff offices.

	£ million
Year to 31 March 1970	19.6
Year to 31 December 1980	11.9
Year to 31 December 1990	14.5
Year to 31 December 1999	15.3

The substantially lower figure in 1980 largely reflects the significant relative deterioration in all clergy stipends in the 1970s.

Usual Sunday attendance figures for the equivalent years are as follows, 1998 being the latest year for which statistics are currently available:

1970: 1,542,000

1980: 1,240,000

1990: 1,143,000

1998: 977,900.

These figures should however be treated with caution. The system for measuring attendance has been and continues to be under periodic review. Consequently the figures quoted are not on a like-for-like basis. Nor do they include attendance in the Diocese in Europe.

The methodology now under discussion also recognises that a true picture of church attendance needs to take account of midweek and occasional services as well as those on Sunday. For these reasons, calculating a ratio in the manner suggested could be misleading.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Support Agency

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what his timetable is for the implementation of the proposed changes to the Child Support Agency; and what proposals he has to amend assessments made under the existing rules. [133988]

Angela Eagle: The child support reforms in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 will be introduced for new cases by April 2002. Parents who have an existing maintenance assessment will be transferred to the new scheme at a later date when the new system is shown to be working well.

Maintenance calculations made under the new scheme will be based on a simple percentage of the non-resident parent's net income. This means that many parents with an existing child support assessment will see a change to their liability when they are transferred to the new scheme. The change to the new rate will be phased in over a period of up to five years to give families time to adjust.

The White Paper "A new contract for welfare: Children's Rights and Parents' Responsibilities" (CM 4349) sets out the scheme in more detail and contains tables showing what the basic liability will be at different levels of income.

Budgeting Loans

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications were made for a budgeting loan in 1999–2000; and how many were refused on the grounds of inability to meet the repayments. [133849]

Angela Eagle: Of the 1,680,000 applications made for budgeting loans in 1999–2000 only 255 were refused because of inability to repay.

Refusal on these grounds would arise where an applicant who would otherwise be eligible is already repaying a social fund loan at the maximum rate applicable in their circumstances.

In 1999–2000 the overall number of budgeting loan awards rose by 82,000 and the gross expenditure was £52 million higher than in 1998–99.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reason the annexe, "Budgeting Loans Reasons for Refusal by Client Group", was omitted from his 1999–2000 Annual Report on the Social Fund. [133850]

Angela Eagle: A table showing budgeting loan reasons for refusal by client group was not included in the 1999–2000 Annual Report because under the new budgeting loan scheme most of the reasons for refusal have either been changed or abolished. There were previously seven main reasons for refusal and there are now three. Thus, individual reasons for refusal in 1999–2000 do not directly compare with those from previous years. For this reason it was decided that it was more appropriate to include details on the main reasons for refusals in the narrative of the report, paragraphs 7.5 to 7.7.

A copy of the Annual Report on the Social Fund 1999–2000 is in the Library.

Attendance Allowance

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people receive Attendance Allowance *(a)* in the constituency of Glasgow, Pollok and *(b)* in Glasgow. [134165]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Attendance Allowance is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Ian Davidson, dated 23 October 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people receive attendance allowance (a) in the constituency of Glasgow, Pollock and (b) in Glasgow.

The latest information available as at 31 May 1999 is that there are 2,049 recipients in the constituency of Glasgow, Pollock and 19,781 in Glasgow

I hope this is helpful.

Winter Heating Allowance

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many households will benefit from the winter heating allowance in Warrington, South in 2000. [133752]

Angela Eagle: For winter 1999–2000, 17,061 customers in the Warrington, South constituency qualified for a Winter Fuel Payment of either £100 or £50, dependant on their circumstances. This figure includes those in receipt of one of the qualifying benefits as well as men from age 60 who qualified through receipt of either Income Support or income-based Jobseekers Allowance.

The Winter Fuel Payment scheme has now been extended so that men as well as women will be eligible for a payment from age 60, providing they satisfy the qualifying criteria. The changes apply from the beginning of the scheme in 1997–98 and payments will be made for past winters to customers who are entitled. The majority of the customers who are newly eligible will need to make a claim.

This means that the figure given above in respect of 1999–2000 could be higher for winter 2000. How much higher will depend on the number of people who decide to make a claim and how many are entitled.

Therefore, it is not possible to give a precise number of how many households may benefit from winter fuel allowance until all payments are made on the claims received and through the legacy systems, that is, those people receiving qualifying benefits.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Illegal Logging

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she has taken to combat illegal logging; and if she will make a statement in respect of implementation and related procurement practices. [134187]

Mr. Foulkes: Addressing the underlying causes of illegal logging in tropical rain forests is complicated and requires a range of actions, not only in the forest sector. For this reason, through the Department for International Development (DFID), we are working to encourage good government, reduce the burden of debt on developing countries and develop alternative livelihoods for the poor.

Our main efforts are directed at combating illegal logging at source and addressing the other underlying causes of poor forest management, since most illegally harvested timber is consumed domestically. We help countries develop their capacity to assess the nature and extent of illegal logging and to take counter-measures. We help them develop national forest programmes. Early next year, together with the US and World bank, we will sponsor a high-level meeting in South-East Asia to examine what can be done to strengthen enforcement of forestry laws in the region.

In Okinawa the G8 leaders made a commitment to

examine how best we can combat illegal logging, including export and procurement practices.

In response, the Government are committing departments to seek to buy timber and timber products from sustainable and legal sources, for example those identified under independent certification schemes such as that operated by the Forestry Stewardship Council. Government Departments will have to report annually on their progress, and this will be monitored by an inter-departmental group reporting to the committee of Green Ministers.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Tobacco

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for which products he supports the EU prohibition of the manufacture within the United Kingdom of certain legal products which conform with the regulations of third countries. [132338]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 24 July 2000]:* I understand that the hon. Member's question refers to the proposed EU Directive concerning the manufacture, presentation and sale of tobacco products (known as the 'EU Tobacco Labelling Directive').

The Government support the 'common position' on the Directive agreed by the EU Health Council on 29 June.

The common position includes agreement to the provision in Article 3 of the draft Directive which will require that, from 1 January 2004, the yield of cigarettes released for free circulation, marketed or manufactured in the member states shall not exceed:

10mg per cigarette for tar

1mg per cigarette for nicotine;

10mg per cigarette for carbon monoxide.

Correspondence

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Spelthorne dated 10 February relating to his constituent, Mr. David Allan. [130657]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 17 July 2000]:* I replied to the hon. Member on behalf of the Secretary of State on Thursday 27 July 2000.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Government decided to underwrite plans by Balfour Beatty to undertake work on the Ilisu Dam in Turkey; and what the maximum potential liability is to the Treasury assessed from such underwriting. [134190]

Mr. Caborn: The Government have not yet taken a decision to underwrite Balfour Beatty's application for support from the Export Credits Guarantee Department in respect of the Ilisu Dam project. We do not expect to take such a decision until we have seen and assessed both and revised Environmental Impact Assessment Report and the Resettlement Action Plan which are currently being prepared.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library the reports of Dr. Ayse Kudat concerning the social and environmental impacts of the Ilisu Dam in Turkey. [134169]

Mr. Caborn: Dr. Kudat's reports are not the property of the Government. Following my hon. Friend's question, the Export Credits Guarantee Department asked the owners of the reports, the Export Risk Guarantee Agency (the Swiss export credit agency), whether they were prepared to allow them to be placed in the Library of the House. The owners have replied that they are not prepared to allow the reports to be made available at this time. When the final reports are available, we will seek agreement to their being made publicly available.

Fraudulent Sales Promotions

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals he has to introduce measures to control fraudulent sales promotions from operators outside the UK; and if he will make a statement. [R] [134148]

Dr. Howells: I am concerned about these promotions and am setting out the action the Government are taking to tackle them. The legislation which is currently in place to protect consumers includes:

the Unsolicited Goods and Services (Amendment) Act 1975, which prevents traders from demanding payment for goods or services which are unsolicited and sets rules on content of invoices and directory entries;

the Control of Misleading Advertisements Regulations 1988, which enable the Director General of Fair Trading (DGFT) to stop the publication of a misleading advertisement;

the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000, which come into force on 31 October, protect consumers shopping on the internet, by mail order, on the telephone or by fax. If suppliers do not fulfil contracts or fail to return consumers' money, the DGFT and local authority Trading Standards Departments can seek injunctions. If fraudulent use is made of a consumer's credit or debit card he or she can cancel the payment;

the Lotteries and Amusement Act 1976, which sets the rules on competitions (which must entail a degree of skill) and lotteries (which generally cannot be run for private or commercial gain). It is unlawful to promote or advertise a foreign lottery in the UK.

In addition, when the European Community Directive No. 98/27/EC on injunctions for the protection of consumers' interests is implemented in the UK next year, the DGFT and other qualifying bodies will be able to seek injunctions in the courts of other member states to stop operators there from directing false and misleading sales promotions at UK consumers.

I recognise the problems of taking enforcement action against sales promotion scams originating outside the UK—and particularly from beyond Europe. Apart from jurisdictional constraints on the DGFT and other UK authorities, it is often hard to trace the sales promotion operator. They may hide behind PO box addresses, which are used as solely collection or distribution points for mail. Operators move from country to country to avoid detection and frequently change the postal services they use.

The Government are working with industry and our regulatory authorities to address this situation. We are determined in particular to improve co-operation and information sharing between authorities in Europe and around the world. The following actions are being taken:

the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) works closely with its overseas counterparts from the 30 or so OECD countries, through the International Marketing Supervision Network (IMSN). OFT's counterparts have had some success in stopping some of the worst cases targeting UK consumers;

the Government are pursuing closer bi-lateral enforcement links with other major trading nations outside the EU. We are in discussion with the United States Federal Trade Commission (FTC) about a possible memorandum of understanding on co-operation between the DGFT, UK trading standard departments and the FTC;

the Royal Mail can refuse to deliver material from abroad which contravenes the law, once it has been notified about it (it cannot intercept or open mail addressed to a PO box). The Advertising Standards Authority (the independent self-regulatory body for the industry), the police, trading standards officers and magistrates can notify Royal Mail about material which contravenes the law. Any UK PO box being used fraudulently will be withdrawn. We are ensuring that ways of bringing scams to the attention of the Post Office are effective and that the avenues by which scam promoters reach consumers are closed off;

the ASA, which supervises the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion, investigates complaints about misleading promotions and is working with national and international

regulators. The ASA refers mailings to the appropriate regulatory body in the country in question; those from Europe are channelled via the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA).

Private Sector Secondments

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the private sector companies from which secondments have been made to his Department since June 1997. [133877]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) on 3 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 18–24W. Since then, the DTI has set up further inward secondments from the following companies:

Association of British Healthcare Inds
AEA Technology plc
Traditional Weatherwear Ltd.
Tate and Lyle plc
United Utilities plc
Science and Technology Agency
Shell UK Oil Products Ltd.
Cable and Wireless
Printing Industries Federation
Goldshield Pharmaceuticals
SNS Bioengineering Development Ltd.
Combined Heat and Power Association
The MVA Consultancy Group
Foster Wheeler Energy Ltd.
Drinks Marketing
Project North East
Raylian London Ltd.
AMEC Process and Energy
Process and Energy
David Rubens and Company
Allen and Overy
Lloyds TSB Group plc
BT
Burlington Consultants
Confederation of British Industry
Deloitte and Touche
Gilbert Gilkes and Gordon Ltd.
Astra Zeneca
Ericsson Ltd.
KPMG
Durham University
Grant Thornton.

Asteroids

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to respond to the report of the departmental Task Force on Asteroids set up in January. [134166]

Ms Hewitt: I expect to respond to the Report of the Task Force on Potentially Hazardous Near Earth Objects at the turn of the year.

Late Payment

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on compensation for payment by public bodies after 30 days of invoices from small businesses. [134113]

Ms Hewitt: The Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998 currently seeks to recompense the supplier for the time value of money. It does not currently provide for the cost of pursuing the debt.

The Government are aware that legislation in other EU countries includes charges for the pursuit of the debt, and we have worked closely with our European partners on the forthcoming EC Directive on combating late payment in commercial transactions.

We welcome the recent publication of the Council and Parliament approved text and we are keen to work with the business community and ministerial colleagues to ensure that the Directive is implemented as soon as possible.

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ensure that small businesses automatically receive interest from public bodies on late payments made after 30 days of being invoiced. [134111]

Ms Hewitt: The Government currently have no plans to make changes to the Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998.

The Act came into force on 1 November 1998. From that date, small businesses have had an automatic right to claim interest from the public sector on debts incurred under contracts agreed after that date.

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to ensure that public bodies settle invoices from small businesses within a 30 day period. [134112]

Ms Hewitt: All Government Departments and Agencies are required to pay all undisputed bills within 30 days of receipt of the goods or services or a valid invoice, whichever is later, or other agreed credit period. Since 1993 all Government Departments and Agencies have been required to monitor their payment performance. The figures are published annually in the form of a written PQ.

Tough targets have been set to ensure that we continue to improve public sector payment performance. For 1997–98 all Departments were required to pay 95 per cent. of their invoices on time, 97.5 per cent. was introduced for 1998–99 and 100 per cent. for 1999–2000.

For the financial year 1999–2000, the overall payment performance of Government was 97.89 per cent.

Car Prices

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps the Government have taken to regulate the price of cars in response to the report of the Competition Commission. [133806]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry made an Order under the Fair Trading Act 1973 on 1 August to implement the recommendations in the Competition Commission report on the supply of new cars. The Order came into effect on 1 September. It contains a number of provisions, including a requirement that suppliers must offer dealers

who purchase volumes of cars outright equivalent discounts to those offered to fleet customers who purchase similar volumes.

Supermarkets Inquiry

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Competition Commission's Inquiry into supermarkets will look at the impact on small *(a)* newsagents and *(b)* publishers of the proposed distribution arrangements for magazines between Tesco and W H Smith News. [133817]

Dr. Howells: The Competition Commission did not investigate the supply of newspapers or magazines as part of its inquiry into the supply of groceries from supermarkets.

EU Import Preferences

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the selective elimination and reduction of import duties on products imported into the UK under EU preferences enables eligible third country producers to benefit from a combination of stronger export pricing power, larger export sales and increased competitiveness in EU markets relative to third country producers that are not eligible to participate in EU preferences. [133709]

Mr. Caborn: Increased preferences will benefit those third country producers eligible to receive them. Those producers overall should experience larger export sales and/or higher returns on exports, as a result of their increased competitiveness in the EU market.

A reduction in the normal level (i.e. MFN) of import duties lessens the value of preferential tariffs offered by the EC. In products where preferences are offered, their erosion tends to weaken and not strengthen the export pricing power of exporters receiving preferences compared with those who do not. Against this, however, the elimination or steady reduction of import duties in general improves the market access of those receiving preferences and offers scope for expansion of exports in other products.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if third country exporters and producers are expected to derive benefit from their participation in the import preferences granted their products under the EU's preferential trade-related agreements. [133708]

Mr. Caborn: Third country exporters and producers granted trade preferences are expected to benefit from them through increased exports to the EU.

A general reduction in import duties would reduce the value of trade preference. However, developing countries could benefit from the general reduction of tariffs in sectors where they have particular comparative cost advantage.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Police Service

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is his response to the Chief Constable's first evaluation of the comprehensive Tutor Officer scheme; how many Tutor Officers have been selected; where they are based; what their geographical spread is from policing districts across Northern Ireland; what their composition is in terms of *(a)* gender and *(b)* perceived community background; what training they have had; how many hours training they have had on the operation of the Human Rights Act 1998; and how many officers have received training to date. [133528]

Mr. Ingram: Following in-house evaluation, work is underway to enhance the Tutor Officer scheme. A further evaluation will then be made. There are currently 157 Tutor Officers of whom 138 are male and 19 female. Of these, 128 are perceived to be from a Protestant background and 22 perceived to be from a Roman Catholic background while seven are not determined. The geographical spread reflects the demand based on the number of probationers in each RUC Division.

Each tutor attends a five-day training course in addition to a one-day course on Human Rights. Both are provided as part of the force-wide training programme.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps have been taken to recruit teachers for the police training programme on the Human Rights Act 1998; what arrangements has he made to facilitate officers' completion of the course; how many hours of tuition and study each officer will undertake; and by what criteria officers will be assessed on their comprehension of the issues and ability to put human rights policing into effect. [133530]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Ulster Constabulary has worked in partnership with the University of Ulster to design and deliver the introductory Human Rights training programme. University staff trained officers of Chief Inspector rank and above and also trained the Royal Ulster Constabulary trainers who went on to provide the training for officers in the ranks of Constable, Sergeant and Inspector. A booklet developed in conjunction with the University of Ulster and agreed with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has been provided to each officer as part of the preparation for six hours of training. The ability of officers to put Human Rights Policing into effect will be addressed within the new competency framework for staff appraisal.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what preparations have been made for the Office of Police Ombudsman to become fully operational; what budget has been assigned for publicity aimed at *(a)* officers and staff of the Police Service, *(b)* members of the public, *(c)* members of disadvantaged groups, *(d)* people with disabilities, *(e)* people whose first language is not English, *(f)* children and *(g)* users of police stations. [133532]

Mr. Ingram: The Office of the Police Ombudsman will occupy premises, known as New Cathedral Buildings, which are in central Belfast. The premises were acquired in March of this year and after extensive design work were fully fitted out to a high standard by the beginning of August. The Police Ombudsman (Designate) moved into her new offices, one month ahead of schedule, on 14 August.

Recruitment of the 90 new staff for the Ombudsman's office is nearing completion. This involved an extensive programme of advertising in the UK, North America,

Australia and South Africa and subsequently an exhaustive selection process. Because of the nature of the work that will be undertaken, an extensive programme of training has been developed with the assistance of the Northern Ireland Office, Metropolitan Police Service, RUC, University of Ulster and various other public bodies and voluntary organisations. Training is due to commence in early October at various venues in the UK. (Existing staff of the Independent Commission for Police Complaints will transfer to the new body).

Protocols are currently in the final stages of agreement or are being developed between the Ombudsman, Northern Ireland Office, Independent Commission for Police Complaints, Chief Constable and the RUC to accommodate transitional and investigative arrangements.

The Ombudsman will have an annual budget of £5.7 million; what proportion of that will be allocated to publicity aimed at specific groups of people will be a matter for the Ombudsman to decide.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in drawing up revised conduct regulations for police officers; what bodies have been consulted over draft versions; what advice he has sought from police services in other jurisdictions; and when he plans to introduce the new regulations. [133534]

Mr. Ingram: The revised conduct regulations and guidance have been completed and are currently undergoing final consultation in line with section 64(4) of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998. This section requires the Secretary of State to consult the Ombudsman, the Police Authority and the Police Association before making regulations governing the conduct of the police. Others consulted include the Chief Constable, the Independent Commission for Police Complaints, Director of Public Prosecutions and the Human Rights Commission.

In formulating the new regulations, which mirror that of England and Wales, advice was sought from the Home Office who co-ordinated the responses of police forces across England and Wales. The revised regulations are due to come into force on 6 November.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made so far in downsizing the Police Service; and what his estimate is of likely progress in the next six months. [133545]

Mr. Ingram: The closing date for applications in year one of the scheme is the 30 November 2000. To date there have been over 600 expressions of interest for early retirement, however, the actual number of applicants for year one will not be known until the expiry of the closing date. At this stage it is estimated that approximately 600 officers will leave by 31 March 2001.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what written documentation in furtherance of the Patten implementation plan has been supplied to the Oversight Commissioner in order to set out the objectives in the next 12 months of *(a)* the Government, *(b)* the Police Service and *(c)* the Police Authority; and if he will place such documentation in the Library. [133536]

Mr. Ingram: The Government's Implementation Plan, published in June 2000, sets out how the recommendations in the Report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland are being implemented.

The Government, RUC and Police Authority have made, and will continue to make, such information available to the Oversight Commissioner as is needed for the performance of his functions. No central record is kept of the information given.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he published each of the regulations on *(a)* part-time working, *(b)* job-sharing and *(c)* career breaks for police officers and Police Service civilians; how this information has been disseminated and at what cost; how many officers and civilians will have taken these options by the end of the first year of their introduction; and what his estimate is for each of the next five years. [133538]

Mr. Ingram: Part-time working and job-sharing arrangements for police officers were introduced by Force Order on 24 July 1997. There is currently no facility for career breaks although police officers can and do take periods of unpaid leave.

Northern Ireland Civil Service Circulars introduced part-time working and job-sharing arrangements for civilian support staff on 14 August 1987. Career breaks followed on 28 March 1998.,

Costs associated with issuing information on these schemes are not readily available.

Eight police officers availed of part-time working in the first year of operation (September 1997 to August 1998). To date, no police officers have opted for job-sharing. Figures relating to the first year of the civilian schemes are not available.

It is difficult to project the potential uptake of each scheme over the next five years, but given that 25 police officers have availed of part-time working since its introduction, it is reasonable to assume that up to 40 officers may avail of the scheme during the next five years. Similarly, up to 25 civilian support staff may be expected to take up part-time or job-sharing with the same number taking career breaks.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment the Human Rights Commission has made of the police training programme on the Human Rights Act 1998; how many officers have completed this course; what evaluation he has made of its effectiveness; and what progress has been made on drawing up guidelines and contents for a course on the impact on policing of the new constitutional arrangements for Northern Ireland, the new policing arrangements set out in the Patten report and the proposed reforms of the criminal justice system. [133529]

Mr. Ingram: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Human Rights Commission to write to my hon. Friend on the Commission's assessment of the police training programme on the Human Rights Act 1998. I have asked for a copy of the letter to be made available so that it can be placed in the Library.

At the 23 August 2000, 9,035 officers had attended training on the Human Rights Act with remaining officers to attend in the near future.

The Secretary of State commends the efforts of the RUC to give priority to the training of its members in the implications of the Human Rights Act.

The implementation of recommendation 141 of the Patten Report is addressed in the Government's Implementation Plan (published June 2000). Progress will be assessed by the independent Oversight Commissioner.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures have been taken to identify appropriate non-police environment institutions for management training in Ireland and overseas; and how many members of the Change Management Team have studied or have the qualifications to assess the effectiveness of management workshops. [133531]

Mr. Ingram: Substantive links have already been established with the University of Ulster at Jordanstown and a number of officers have either completed or are undertaking management related academic courses outside the police environment. The Training, Education and Development Strategy currently being developed by the RUC will further address this issue.

A number of members of the RUC's Change Management Team have qualifications at degree level and above. For example, two have PhDs in 'Making Strategy Work in Police Organisations' and 'Auditing Internal Communication in a Major Police Organisation'. In addition, a number are members of professional bodies.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps have been taken to draw up personal specification and job description for *(a)* a Commissioner for Covert Law Enforcement and *(b)* members of a Complaints Tribunal for Covert Law Enforcement operations; when and where he will advertise these positions; what the composition will be of the interview panel; how many of its members will be independent; and if he will place the relevant documents in the Library. [133533]

Mr. Ingram: The Regulation of Investigating Powers Act 2000 makes provision for the regulation of covert policing techniques and provides for commissioner oversight in Northern Ireland. In addition, the Act provides for a UK-wide complaints tribunal.

Appointments will be made in accordance with the provisions of the legislation.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many and what percentage of police officers recruited in the last two years are studying for academic qualifications; what is the numerical and percentage breakdown by type of qualifications sought and subjects studied; what measures have been taken to encourage officers to undertake academic courses; and what assessment he has made of their effectiveness. [133535]

Mr. Ingram: From June 1999, a total of 188 (100 per cent.) new recruits have been required to study for a Certificate in Police Studies as part of their two year probation period. Of these, 69 (37 per cent.) have opted to pursue a Diploma in Police Studies. Following successful completion of their probation, officers are eligible to apply for financial assistance and facilitation to pursue other courses of further education and are actively encouraged to do so. It is too early to assess effectiveness while the students pursue their chosen studies.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will publish the severance arrangements agreed with police representatives; what is the estimate of the total expenditure involved; and what is his forecast of the costs of severance and other payments associated with the downsizing programme calculated on a quarterly basis for each of the next 10 years. [133537]

Mr. Ingram: The severance arrangements were published on 24 July by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in a booklet entitled "A Northern Ireland Office booklet on the Voluntary Early Retirement and Severance Scheme for the RUC". A copy of this has been placed in the Library.

The estimated gross cost of severance is in the region of £1 billion over the next ten years. It is not possible to provide a quarterly breakdown at this stage given the voluntary nature of the scheme.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many Police Service staff are assigned to develop a new appraisal system for human rights performance; what grades and ranks these staff are; how many hours per week they are working on this project; where they are based and what is their geographical spread from policing districts across Northern Ireland; what their composition is in respect of *(a)* gender and *(b)* perceived community background; when this project started and when it will be completed; and what is its (i) work programme and (ii) budget. [133539]

Mr. Ingram: The Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary has initiated a review of the RUC's appraisal system in light of the recommendations contained within the Report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland. The number of people involved in the work has varied to meet required needs and it is not possible to answer this question without incurring a disproportionate cost. The independent Oversight Commissioner will report to the Secretary of State on the implementation of the changes.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what personal specification and job description have been drawn up for the appointment of a lawyer with human rights expertise to advise the police service; what will be the composition of the interview panel; and how many of its members will be independent. [133512]

Mr. Ingram: A personal specification and job description are currently being drafted. Decisions on the selection process will be made when they are agreed.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many police cars are currently in service, what the figures were for *(a)* July 1994 and *(b)* July 1998; and how many armoured Land Rovers were in regular use for patrols in (i) July 1994, (ii) July 1998 and (iii) July 2000. [133513]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Ulster Constabulary held 350 Land Rovers in July 1994 and 450 in July 1998 and July 2000. While the number of Land Rovers used for regular

patrol duties are not available for the years 1994 and 1998, approximately 110 were used for such purposes during July 2000.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in painting the word POLICE on the side of each Land Rover currently in service. [133514]

Mr. Ingram: Work is ongoing but 80 per cent. of the operational fleet has already been completed including 25 white liveried Land Rovers.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in drawing up the terms of reference for an independent, strategic review of the use of information technology in policing; how and whom he will consult on these terms of reference; and when he will advertise for tenders to be submitted. [133515]

Mr. Ingram: An independent strategic review by a consultant appointed through the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA), was already under way at the time of the publication of the Report of the Independent Commission for Policing in Northern Ireland.

In light of the recommendations of that report it was decided to develop the consultant's information systems proposals to take account of new business processes and priorities that emerged from the change management process. Subsequently, a Strategic Information System consultant was appointed by competitive tendering arrangements through the Government Purchasing Agency to validate the way forward under Recommendation 93 of the Report of the Independent Commission for Policing in Northern Ireland.

The Government's implementation plan requires the strategic review of IT strategy to be completed by March 2001, validated by June 2001 and implemented over a three to five year period.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures have been taken to inform police recruitment agencies in Great Britain of the advantages of recruiting former RUC officers and reservists; and how many ex-RUC officers and reservists have been recruited in the last 12 months. [133516]

Mr. Ingram: The RUC Voluntary Severance Support Unit has been in communication with all GB police forces to indicate a potential recruitment base from former members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and RUC Reserve. There have been no former RUC officers recruited by GB forces within the last 12 months.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what personal specification and job description has been drawn up for *(a)* members of the group to review criminal convictions and other character tests to determine the suitability of candidates applying to join the police service and *(b)* the independent adviser to sit on this group; what the composition will be of the interview panels; and how many of their members will be independent; when he expects the report of the review group to be completed; and what arrangements he has made to publish the report. [133518]

Mr. Ingram: The implementations of recommendation 125 of the Report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland is covered in the Government's implementation plan. Members of the review group established by the Chief Constable, including its independent chairman, have civilian and police recruiting, human resources and research experience.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he plans to *(a)* cease using and shut down remaining holding centres at Gough Barracks and Strand Road; how many fully equipped custody suites are currently available and in which police stations; and what additional facilities will come on line in the next six months. [133519]

Mr. Ingram: Strand Road holding centre closed with effect from 1 October. Gough Barracks is the facility currently available to the Royal Ulster Constabulary which meets all the statutory requirements for the detention and interviewing of terrorist suspects. It is not anticipated that any additional facilities will come on line within the next six months. There are 22 fully equipped PACE custody suites across the province at the following police stations: Musgrave Street, Grosvenor Road, Lisburn, Antrim Road, Antrim, Strandtown, Newtownards, Downpatrick, Armagh, Lurgan, Banbridge, Cookstown, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Omagh, Strand Road, Waterside, Strabane, Coleraine, Limavady, Ballymena and Larne.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what were the terms of reference for the research currently being undertaken on the uniform to be worn by members of the new police service; how many institutions submitted tenders to undertake this research; what were the best-value criteria employed; if he will place the outline of the successful research proposal in the Library; and what is the estimated cost of this research. [133520]

Mr. Ingram: The time constraints imposed by the Government implementation plan mitigated against tendering for research in this matter. As a result, a Uniform Sub-Committee was created within the Royal Ulster Constabulary with the terms of reference "to advise the Chief Constable on the needs of the Force for a new more practical style of uniform". During the course of its work, the Sub-Committee has sought the views of officers through the participation of staff representatives on the committee; held roadshows throughout the Force; issued and analysed responses to a survey; examined problems with the existing uniform and sourced five years of research on this issue carried out by a committee within the Association of Chief Police Officers.

The research has developed a range of suggestions and recommendations, which have been presented to senior command within the Royal Ulster Constabulary. I have no plans to place an outline of the research material in the Library at present.

As the research has been carried out in-house, it has involved limited expenditure.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions his Department has initiated with *(a)* the Irish Government and *(b)* the Garda Siochana to consider facilitation of lateral recruitment of experienced officers into the new police service. [133521]

Mr. Ingram: Issues of North/South co-operation on policing covered by the Report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland have been discussed in a number of meetings with the Irish Government.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions have been held with *(a)* the Irish Government and *(b)* the Garda Siochana to identify possible venues for the first annual conference between police services north and south of the border. [133522]

Mr. Ingram: Issues of North/South co-operation on policing covered by the Report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland have been discussed in a number of meetings with the Irish Government.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the composition of the Change Management Team established by the Chief Constable; how many police service officers and staff are assigned to the team; what grades and ranks these staff are; how many hours per week they are working on this project; where they are based and what their geographical spread is from policing districts across Northern Ireland; and what their composition is in terms of *(a)* gender and *(b)* perceived community background. [133524]

Mr. Ingram: There are currently 18 officers:

Assistant Chief Constable—1

Chief Superintendent—1

Superintendent—3

Chief Inspectors—2

Inspectors—6

Sergeants—3

Constables—2

and six civilian staff:

Principal Officer—1

Executive Officer Grade 1—1

Executive Officer Grade 2—2

Administrative Officer—1

Administrative Assistant—1

working full time as the RUC's Change Management Team based at RUC Headquarters. Of the 23 team members, 17 are male and six are female. I do not consider it appropriate to comment on perceived community background.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many external change specialists have been *(a)* consulted by and *(b)* recruited to the Change Management Team established by the Chief Constable; what method of selection was employed to ensure best value in appointments of external consultancies; and what has been the cost to date of external consultancies. [133541]

Mr. Ingram: To date a total of eight consultants have been selected by competitive tender to assist with the change process in the RUC at a cost of around £70,000. In addition the RUC Change Manager has as a mentor Professor Andrew Kakabadse, Chairman of the Human Resources Network and Director of the Cranfield Centre for International Development, Cranfield University.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he has taken to provide a non-discriminatory working environment for all Police Service employees; how many complaints have been made by employees in the past 12 months; how many disciplinary actions have been instigated; what evidence has been distributed to workplaces; what consultation has taken place with employees; what surveys have been undertaken to solicit views of employees; and what information exchanges have been initiated with non-UK police services. [133525]

Mr. Ingram: The following actions have been taken to date. The introduction of harassment policy and distribution of harassment posters and booklets throughout the organisation; literature on the Neutral Working Environment distributed to Sub-Divisional Commanders; the establishment of a confidential helpline; Harassment Support officers appointed throughout the force; corresponding poster campaign and circular to staff publicising same; inclusion of equality and harassment sessions on induction training and on training for new recruits; inclusion of module on Equal Opportunities in the Management Development Programme for civilian staff; introduction of anti-harassment training for all officers; introduction of harassment resolution training on the management course for sergeants and inspectors; introduction of Equal Opportunities Awareness for all civilian staff.

Future action will include the inclusion of Harassment Resolution training on new management training being developed for Chief Inspector and Superintendent ranks; review of harassment policy and procedures; review of the Harassment Support Officer scheme; the development of computer based training in grievance resolution.

There have been 89 complaints from employees alleging discrimination and 16 disciplinary investigations commenced in the last 12 months.

Staff surveys have been conducted on Sexual harassment in the Royal Ulster Constabulary; Religious harassment in the Royal Ulster Constabulary; and an NI Civil Service survey on harassment and bullying in the workplace.

Three is regular networking with other public service bodies throughout the UK.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in establishing a fund to help injured police officers, serving or retired and their families; how many Police Service staff are assigned to this project and at what grades and ranks; how many hours per week they are working on this project; where they are based; what their geographical spread is from policing districts across Northern Ireland; and what their composition is in terms of *(a)* gender and *(b)* perceived community background; and what budget has been allocated to this project. [133526]

Mr. Ingram: The Government announced on 27 July 2000 that former senior civil servant John Steele has been appointed to conduct a review of Patten's recommendation 87, that there should be a substantial fund

to help injured police officers and their families, as well as police widows'.

Mr. Steele is on target to report by the end of October. He is being supported by civil servant and his budget is £14,000.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what development work has so far been undertaken in order to prepare the Police Service for carrying out crime pattern and complaint analysis; how many Police Service staff are assigned to develop this programme and at what grades and ranks; how many hours per week they are working on this project; where they are based; what their geographical spread is from policing districts across Northern Ireland; what their composition is in terms of *(a)* gender and *(b)* perceived community background; and what budget has been allocated for this project. [133540]

Mr. Ingram: A Centre has been established to develop, deliver and support a service-wide analytical capability for Crime Pattern Analysis. The centre is staffed by a civilian Grade 7; two Deputy Principals, four Staff Officers; one programmer analyst; seven Executive Officers; six Administrative Officers and three Administrative Assistants. Of the 24 staff, seven are male and 17 female with 14 perceived to be from a Protestant background, four perceived to be from a Roman Catholic background and six staff whose religion is undetermined.

The team is based at offices in Belfast and is working full-time on the project. A full process of consultation is taking place with policing areas across Northern Ireland and it is anticipated that the first dedicated police analysts will be available to local command units before the end of the year. The cost of this project is currently being met from the budget allocation to Operations Department although a bid for additional funding has been made.

Computerised data on complaints are available to commanders in all areas of Northern Ireland for information and analysis. Senior officers in Complaints and Discipline Branch, as part of their day to day duties, monitor individual and broad issues arising from complaints. A Constable and an Assistant Statistician, based in an office in Belfast, are assigned full-time to complaint analysis duties. Given that only two officers staff the office and in the interests of safeguarding personal information, I do not consider it appropriate to comment on their gender or perceived community background.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in investigating options for premises to be used by the RUC Widows Association; where these premises are located; what funding he has agreed to contribute towards the financing of the Widows Association; how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time staff the Association will employ; and what regulations will govern the spending of the association. [133527]

Mr. Ingram: The Government were pleased, in meeting recommendation 88 of the Report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland, to agree funding for the RUC Widows Association to run their organisation. Payment of the grant in aid is subject to standard conditions. Office premises have been set up at 100 Belfast Road, Holywood. The Association plans to employ three part-time co-ordinators.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he expects to receive the first report from the Oversight Commissioner; what arrangements he has put in place to publish the report; how many copies he intends to publish; and at what estimated cost. [133544]

Mr. Ingram: It is anticipated that the Commissioner will make his first report when the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill has completed its Parliamentary passage. The report will be laid before each of the Houses of Parliament. The number of copies to be published and the associated cost have yet to be determined.

Private Sector Secondments

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the private sector companies from which secondments have been made to his Department since June 1997. [133878]

Mr. Mandelson: There have been no secondments as yet to the Northern Ireland Office from private sector companies.

Suicide (Prisons)

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many prisoners took their own lives in prison in Northern Ireland in each of the last 10 years broken down by age, religion, institution in which they were held and the method of death. [134159]

Mr. Ingram: There were no suicides in Northern Ireland prison establishments in 1992 and 1993. Details for the other years are as shown. The method used in all cases was hanging. Religious affiliation is private confidential information.

1990—1 inmate, Magilligan, aged 31 years

1991—1 inmate, Belfast, aged 31 years

1994—2 inmates, Belfast, aged 24 and 27 years

1994—1 inmate, Maghaberry, aged 31 years

1995—1 inmate, Belfast, aged 19 years

1995—1 inmate, Maghaberry, aged 30 years

1996—1 inmate, Maghaberry, aged 25 years

1997—1 inmate, Maghaberry, aged 29 years

1998—1 inmate, Maghaberry, aged 22 years

1999—1 inmate, Maghaberry, aged 35 years.

Coroners' inquests have yet to determine the cause of three other deaths in prison. During the same period there has been one death due to hanging in the Young Offenders Centre and two other deaths there are under investigation by the Coroner.

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when action to prevent suicide in Northern Ireland prisons will be brought into line with practice in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [134156]

Mr. Ingram: Suicide awareness policy and practice in the Northern Ireland Prison Service is broadly in line with practice in prison establishments in England and Wales.

Suicides (Hydebank Wood)

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many times heavy canvas suits have been used on suicidal boys in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Institution in each of the last 10 years. [134158]

Mr. Ingram: Heavy canvas suits have not been used on any inmate considered to be at risk of suicide or self-harm at HM Young Offenders Centre during the last 10 years.

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many times single separation has been used on suicidal boys in Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Institution in each of the last 10 years. [134157]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is available only from 1995.

Records show that the observation room in the Young Offenders Centre hospital has been used for inmates who are deemed to be medically at risk. This will include, but not exclusively, inmates considered to be at risk of suicide or self-harm.

The information is as follows:

Year	*Times*
1995	21
1996	27
1997	25
1998	38
1999	38
2000	[1]30

[1] Up to 13 October 2000

None of the inmates that were placed in the observation room has taken his own life there.

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many boys who committed suicide in Hydebank Wood had been *(a)* subjected to single separation in an observation cell and *(b)* placed in a heavy canvas suit. [134155]

Mr. Ingram: Heavy canvas suits are not in use in the Young Offenders Centre. No inmate placed in the observation cell in the Centre hospital has taken his life there.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

RUC Officers

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has held with *(a)* the United Nations, *(b)* the OSCE and *(c)* other international organisations concerning the participation of serving and former RUC officers in peace-keeping duties overseas. [133523]

Mr. Hain: The RUC are one of the many police forces in the UK who contribute valuable officers as part of UK civilian police contingents to international peacekeeping operations.

My officials are in regular contact with those international and regional organisations deploying civilian police overseas to discuss issues relating to the deployment of UK civilian police, including the RUC.

European Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy towards the development of a charter of fundamental rights. [134204]

Mr. Vaz: The Government strongly support the Charter. People need to know their rights, and the EU Institutions need to respect them. The Conclusions of the June 1999 Cologne European Council set out the rationale for the Charter. It has two main benefits: it sets out fundamental rights and principles that the EU Institutions should respect when going about their daily business, and promotes their visibility and accessibility.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place the provisional text of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights in the Library. [134172]

Mr. Vaz: The draft text submitted to the Biarritz European Council was placed in the Libraries of both Houses earlier this month.

DEFENCE

Ships Names and Badges Committee

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the members of the Ships' Names and Badges Committee, the dates and locations of meetings during the last 12 months and the costs of such meetings. [134164]

Dr. Moonie: The Ships Names and Badges Committee was formed in 1983 with the amalgamation of the Ships Names Committee (founded in 1913) and the Ships Badges Committee (founded in 1918). The Committee has four standing members:

The Captain, Naval Ship Acceptance (Chairman)
Head Naval Historical Branch, Naval Staff
Naval Regional Officer, Scotland and Northern Ireland
The Admiralty Librarian (Secretary).

The Committee may call upon additional specialist attendees such as the Naval Adviser on Heraldry and representatives of naval commands pertinent to the type of vessel under consideration.

Prior to July of this year, the standing committee was larger, and comprised:

The Captain, Naval Ship Acceptance (Chairman)
Head Naval Historical Branch, Naval Staff
Naval Regional Officer Scotland and Northern Ireland
The Admiralty Librarian (Secretary)
Naval Adviser on Heraldry
Representatives from the staffs of:
Commander in Chief Fleet
Commodore Royal Fleet Auxiliary
Director of Naval Service Conditions
Director of Corporate Communications (Navy)
Director of Naval Resources and Programmes.

The committee has met in the Ministry of Defence, Whitehall on three occasions over the last 12 months:

8 December 1999

8 June 2000

5 October 2000.

There were nine attendees at the first two meetings and three at the last. Each of these meetings has lasted one hour on average but will clearly vary subject to the number of vessels under consideration. The cost of such meetings is minimal.

Radio Systems

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the Bowman Radio Project with special reference to the *(a)* project overrun and *(b)* cost; [133586]

(2) if he will make a statement on future use of the Clausman Radio System with relevance to its life expectancy. [133587]

Dr. Moonie: I have taken these as referring to Bowman and Clansman. Bowman will provide the armed forces with a tactical combat radio communications system to replace the Clansman system which has been in service since the mid 70s. Clansman will continue to be fully supported until the introduction of Bowman. MOD is seeking to maintain the current planned in service date of late 2003/early 2004 for Bowman, but until the outcome of the competition is known it is not possible to give a firm date.

The original Bowman in service date of December 1995 has slipped for a number of reasons including technical difficulties, the collapse of the original competition and industrial and budgetary constraints. The announcement in July this year of our intention to remove preferred supplier status from Archer Communications Systems Ltd. and to run a new competition has placed the project on a firm Smart Procurement footing and we are confident that competition offers the best prospect of delivering the currently planned In Service Date.

For the purposes of new competition, the available budget for the procurement of Bowman is £1.7 billion (VAT inc). This figure excludes sunk costs, long term support and Government Funded Material.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will make a decision on the new prime contractor for Bowman; and if he will state the *(a)* in-service date and *(b)* available budget. [133839]

Mr. Hoon: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert to Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 23 October 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the BOWMAN communication system. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Depending on the outcome of the competition, we expect to award the BOWMAN production contract during late summer 2001.

We are seeking to maintain the current planned in-service date of late 03/early 04, but until the outcome of the competition is know, it is not possible to give a firm date. We remain confident that competition offers the best route to meeting the requirement within an acceptable time-scale. To date, this has been validated by the vigorous competition currently being conducted between potential Prime Contractors.

For the purposes of the new competition, and based on work to date, we have set industry a budget for the procurement of BOWMAN at £1.7 billion. (Vat inc) This figure excludes sunk costs, long term support and Government Funded Material.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the in-service date is for the Bowman combat radio system; and if he will make a statement. [131786]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 23 October 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the BOWMAN communication system. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

I can confirm that MOD is seeking to maintain the current planned in-service date of late 03/early 04, but that until the outcome of the competition, it is not possible to give a firm date. We remain confident that competition offers the best route to meeting the requirement within an acceptable time-scale. To date, this has been validated by the vigorous competition currently being conducted between potential Prime Contractors.

Chinook Crash

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 550W, (1) on the Chinook crash, whether the emergency power warning lights were switched on at the time of the impact at the Wilmington crash; [133755]

(2) if *(a)* the Air Accident Investigation Board and *(b)* his Department have concluded that FADEC was not a factor in the Wilmington crash. [133773]

Mr. Spellar: The incident at Wilmington, USA in 1989 concerned a Chinook HC1 that sustained severe damage. One engine and the transmission/rotor system were over-stressed, while undergoing tests on the ground as part of development testing of a pre-production FADEC system. While the incident was caused by deficient test procedures, development standard FADEC was a factor.

The aircraft did not leave the ground, and there was no crash or impact of any sort, consequently the Air Accidents Investigation Branch placed no part in the subsequent investigations. Rather, a MOD(PE) Unit Inquiry into the incident was held at Wilmington in 1989. The records of that Inquiry do not report whether or not any emergency power warning lights had been illuminated.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 550W, on the Chinook crash, *(a)* who made the examination of the FADEC system as quoted in the Air Accident Investigation Board's report to the RAF Board of Inquiry and *(b)* if that examination found no possible link between the FADEC system and the accident. [133756]

Mr. Spellar: The examination of the FADEC system of Chinook ZD576 was carried out by a Senior Inspector of Air Accidents (Engineering) of the Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB) as part of their independent technical investigation as advisers to the RAF Board of Inquiry into the accident. In conducting the examination the AAIB followed its normal procedures. The FADEC manufacturers took part in the FADEC investigation at the behest of the AAIB to enable it to conduct its investigation more effectively. This type of assistance is routine in such technical investigations and any testing carried out by a manufacturer is directed and supervised by a member of the AAIB to ensure impartial and unbiased advice is received. The level of contractor involvement was consistent with normal practice in military and civil aircraft accident investigations.

FADEC failure was one of the possibilities considered by the Board of Inquiry. The AAIB examined the engine change units and FADEC in some detail. The Board of Inquiry report contains nothing to link the accident to the FADEC system.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 550W, on the Chinook crash, if he will give details of the outcome of his Department's claim against Textron Lycoming. [133759]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 18 November 1997, *Official Report*, column 152W, to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key).

Mr. Arbuthnot: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the criteria on medical evidence used by the RAF Boards of Inquiry into the 1994 Chinook crash and the crash on 1 June 1995 of Harrier GR7 ZG475 were identical. [133590]

Mr. Spellar: All medical investigations following military accidents, including the 1994 Chinook crash and the crash on 1 June 1995 of Harrier GR7 ZG475, are carried out to standards agreed by NATO, and these are comparable to those of the Air Accidents Investigation Board for similar investigations following civil aircraft accidents. Medical investigations into fatal accidents for RAF Boards of Inquiry include an evaluation of the aircrew's medical history and an examination of the remains in an autopsy. However the latter may be limited by the degree of destruction to the body, often encountered in high speed accidents.

Mr. Arbuthnot: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 11 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 456W, on the 1994 Chinook crash, if the fact that the mental and physical state of Flight Lieutenant Cook was most unlikely to have been a factor in the accident is sufficient to establish that there was absolutely no doubt whatsoever about the matter, under RAF Board of Inquiry rules. [133591]

Mr. Spellar: Post mortems were carried out on all the aircraft operating crew and the medical history of each of them was examined fully. The Board of Inquiry concluded that crew incapacitation was not a factor in the accident.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 550W, on the Chinook crash, if he will list the faulty test procedures that his Department was seeking redress for in their litigation claim against Textron Lycoming. [133757]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested relates to the Arbitration proceedings concerning Ministry of Defence's claim for damages following the Wilmington incident and is covered by a confidentiality agreement about the proceedings between the parties. Accordingly, I am withholding the information requested under exemption 4c of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 550W, on the Chinook crash, whether Sir William Wratten and Sir John Day knew of his Department's legal claim against the FADEC manufacturer, Textron Lycoming at the time of their investigation into the fatal crash of Chinook ZD576. [133758]

Mr. Spellar: At the time of the RAF Board of Inquiry into the Mull of Kintyre accident, Sir William Wratten was not aware of this litigation and did not recall the Wilmington incident that led to this legal action being taken.

Sir John Day was aware that there had been a problem with FADEC testing, but did not know of the extent of the Department's legal claim.

Regardless of this, the investigation into the accident was very thorough. All possible causes, including FADEC, were examined, but no evidence was found of technical malfunction.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will place in the Library a copy of the report of the Air Accidents Investigation Branch investigation of the RAF Chinook ZD576; [133996]

(2) if he will place in the Library a copy of the statement given by Mr. R. Parkinson, Senior Inspector of Air Accidents, to the Royal Air Force Board of Inquiry into the crash of RAF Chinook ZD576. [133997]

Mr. Spellar: Both the report of the Air Accidents Investigation Branch and the statement given by Mr. R. Parkinson form part of the RAF Board of Inquiry report concerning this accident which is not in the public domain. I regret that it is our policy to provide such Board of Inquiry reports only to those directly involved, such as the next of kin of the deceased, although of course there is nothing to stop them copying the report further if they wish to do so.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the function of the Institute of Flight Safety; and what role it performed in the Inquiry into the crash of RAF Chinook ZD576. [133994]

Mr. Spellar: The principal aim of the Royal Air Force Inspectorate of Flight Safety (IFS) is to increase the operational effectiveness of the RAF through the promotion and development of flight safety. This is done by providing specialist flight safety advice, guidance and data to assist in eliminating unnecessary flying related risks that contribute to aircraft accidents. One of the core functions of IFS is to advise Boards of Inquiry on the procedural aspects of running such an Inquiry. This is undertaken by two trained Service accident investigation

advisers, who also act as the first point of contact for all external agencies during the initial stages of an Inquiry. These tasks were carried out in the case of the Mull of Kintyre accident but IFS took no part in the actual Inquiry.

Royal Navy Sales

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what former Royal Navy ships have been sold in the last four years; to whom; what was received for each sale; and if he will make a statement. [134138]

Dr. Moonie: For reasons of commercial sensitivity, details of individual sales of former Royal Navy vessels cannot be given. However, during the last four financial years contracts signed from Government to Government and commercial sales of surplus vessels are as follows:

£ million

Financial year	*Amount*
1996–97	12.9
1997–98	4.2
1998–99	0.9
1999–2000	0.2

The vessels sold on a Government to Government basis were:

Type	*Name*	*Country*
River Class Minesweepers	HMS Itchen	Brazil
	HMS Spey	Brazil
	HMS Arun	Brazil
	HMS Blackwater	Brazil
Peacock Class		
Hong Kong Patrol Craft	HMS Peacock	Philippines
	HMS Plover	Philippines
	HMS Starling	Philippines

Additionally, two Hunt Class Mine Counter Measures vessels (HMS Bicester and HMS Berkeley) have been sold to the Hellenic Navy, Greece, (via Vosper Thorneycroft) during this financial year (2000–01). HMS Bicester was transferred 31 July 2000, and HMS Berkeley will be transferred over on 28 February 20001. These vessels are not included in the figures given.

To list the number of vessels sold on a commercial basis could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, some of the more significant sales were:

Type	*Name*	*Destination*
Royal Yacht	HMY Britannia	Britannia Trust
Leander Class Frigate	HMS Jupitor	Samsung HK Ltd.
Leander Class Frigate	HMS Hermione	Samsung HK Ltd.
County Class Destroyer	HMS Kent	Samsung HK Ltd.
Hecla Class Survey Ship	HMS Hecla	Simon Robinson
Ton Class Mine Hunter	HMS Wilton	IMA Agents
Type 42 Destroyer	HMS Birmingham	Resyna SA

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which former Royal Navy submarines have been sold to Canada in the last three years; what plans he has for submarine sales in the next three years and at what price; and if he will make a statement. [134137]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my right hon. Friend Lord Robertson, the then Secretary of State for Defence, gave on 6 April 1998, *Official Report*, column 52, to my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth, (Mr. Healey). Canada has acquired the four ex-Royal Navy Upholder class submarines. The acquisition takes the form of an eight year lease with an option of outright purchase.

The first of the submarines was handed over to Canada on 6 October 2000 and the three remaining submarines will follow over the next 18 months.

The arrangement, which includes the submarines, training and initial spares, is worth some 610 million Canadian dollars.

No other submarine sales or transfers to Canada have taken place over the last three years or are planned over the next three years.

Air Accidents Investigation Branch

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list each occasion in the last 10 years in which the Air Accidents Investigation Branch has been involved in the investigation of military accidents. [133995]

Mr. Spellar: The list of all accidents, since 1990, involving RAF aircraft, but excluding those lost in conflict, where the Air Accidents Investigation Branch have assisted in the subsequent investigation is as follows.

Accidents involving RAF aircraft, excluding those list in conflict, where the AAIB assisted in the subsequent investigation

Date	*Aircraft*	*Location*
30 April 1990	Phantom FGR2 XV402	RAF Valley
30 April 1990	Shackleton AEW2 WR965	Isle of Harris, Outer Hebrides
30 April 1990	Tornado GR1 ZA 454	22nm NE Goose Bay, Canada
9 May 1990	Hawk T1 XX347	RAF Valley
27 June 1990	Canberra E15 WH972	RAF Kinloss
14 August 1990	2 x Tornado GR1 ZA545 and ZA564	N Sea, 10nm NE Spurn Head
16 August 1990	Tornado GR1 ZA561	N Sea, 10nm NE Spurn Head
12 September 1990	Jaguar GR1A XZ387	Solway Firth
17 October 1990	Harrier GR5 ZD355	32nm NW Karup, Denmark
13 November 1990	Jaguar GR1A XX754	Saudi Arabia
7 December 1990	Wessex HC2 XR519	RAF Shawbury
13 January 1991	Tornado GR1 ZD718	Oman, Gulf of Arabia
18 March 1991	Canberra T4 WJ877	RAF Wyton
1 May 1991	Gazelle HT2 XZ940	RAF Tern Hill
10 May 1991	Tornado GR1 ZA367	20nm N Bremen, Germany

Accidents involving RAF aircraft, excluding those list in conflict, where the AAIB assisted in the subsequent investigation

Date	*Aircraft*	*Location*
29 May 1991	Harrier GR7 ZG473	6nm SE RAF Gutersloh
24 June 1991	Puma HC1 XW 215	N Sea 20nm SE RAF Manston
11 September 1991	Hurricane 2C LF363	RAF Wittering
30 September 1991	Harrier GR5 ZD412	RAF Gutersloh, Germany
15 October 1991	Chinook HC1 ZA675	RAF Odiham
30 October 1991	Phantom FGR2 XV421	South Atlantic, near Falklands
12 May 1992	Tucano T1 ZF316	11nm SE Lossiemouth
14 May 1992	Harrier GR3 XZ990	RAF Wittering
9 July 1992	Buccaneer S2B XN976	N Sea, 38nm E RAF Leuchars
7 August 1992	Harrier GR5 ZD350	RAF Wittering
22 September 1992	Sea King HAR3 XZ593	65nm SW RAF Brawdy
16 October 1992	Bulldog T1 XX513	15nm E Belfast
26 November 1992	Puma HC1 XW233	Bessbrook Mill, NI
27 May 1993	Hercules C3 XC193	Scottish Highlands
28 June 1993	Harrier GR7 ZD430	5nm SW Heckington, Lincs
1 July 1993	Hawk T1 XX163	RAF Valley
12 August 1993	Wessex HC2 XR524	Llyn Padern, Gwenydd
26 August 1993	Chipmunk T10 WP980	RAF St. Athan
21 October 1993	Tornado F3 ZE858	Stainmore, Cumbria
23 November 1993	Harrier GR7 ZD432	Sirensk, Northern Iraq
14 January 1994	Harrier GR7 ZD349	5nm SE of Evesham
2 June 1994	Chinook HC2 ZD576	Mull of Kintyre
7 June 1994	Tornado F3 ZE809	N Sea, 45nm NE Scarborough
8 July 1994	Tornado F3 ZH558	Mediterranean Sea
19 July 1994	Tornado GR1 ZA368	Moray Firth
1 September 1994	Tornado GR1 ZG708	Glen Ogle, Scotland
19 September 1994	Tornado GR1 ZG725	Capa Frasca, Sardinia
10 March 1995	Tornado F3 ZE789	N Sea 20nm SE Spurn Head
16 May 1995	Nimrod R1 ZW666	Moray Firth
1 June 1995	Harrier GR7 ZG475	Irish Sea 3nm SE Burrow Head
21 June 1995	Jaguar GR1A XZ373	Adriatic Sea, 21nm N Bari
2 September 1995	Nimrod MR2P XV239	Toronto Waterfront, Canada
30 October 1995	2 x Tornado F3 ZE733 and ZE210	N Sea, 50nm E RAF Leuchars
10 January 1996	2 x Tornado F3 ZE862 and ZE166	8nm W RAF Coningsby
11 January 1996	Tornado GR1 ZE846	5nm SW Munster, Germany
23 January 1996	Jaguar GR1 XX733	RAF Coltishall
13 February 1996	Hawk T1 XX164	RAF Valley
19 February 1996	Harrier GR7 ZG476	4nm SE RAF Wittering
26 February 1996	Tornado GR1 ZD845	9nm SE RAF Laarbruch, Germany
13 May 1996	Tucano T1 ZF270	4nm W Great Driffield
18 September 1996	Jaguar T2A XX143	RAF Lossiemouth
9 January 1997	Harrier GR7 ZD377	RAF Laarbruch
15 February 1997	Puma HC1 XW225	Steingarten, Germany
19 May 1997	Harrier GR7 ZD400	RAF Wittering
3 June 1997	Harrier GR7 ZG861	3nm SW Castle Douglas
21 July 1997	Bulldog T1 XX710	RAF Woodvale
31 October 1997	Harrier GR7 ZD324	½NW RAF Wittering
30 April 1998	Hawk T1 XX186	Irish Sea, 20nm W RAF Valley
18 December 1998	Harrier GR7 ZD434	Barnard Castle
29 January 1999	Harrier GR7 ZG856	Nellis Air Force base, Nevada
4 February 1999	Harrier GR7 ZD326	7nm E RAF Laarbruch
5 March 1999	Bulldog T1 XX666	RAF Leuchars
11 June 1999	Hercules C130 XV298	Kukes Airfield, Albania
9 July 1999	Harrier GR7 ZD345	5m SW Boston
14 July 1999	Harrier GR7 ZG532	6nm E Coldstream
14 October 1999	Tornado GR1 ZD809	1½nm SE Kirkheaton
20 October 1999	Jaguar GR1 XZ381	Moray Firth
22 October 1999	Hawk T1 XX193	Shap, 10nm S Penrith
17 November 1999	Tornado F3 ZE830	1½nm SE Torness power station
25 November 1999	Chinook HC2 ZA704	10 nm S Seeb, Oman
19 April 2000	Puma XW207	RAF Catterick

Formation Communications System

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress his Department has made in the procurement of the Formation Communications System. [132176]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 23 October 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence as to what progress has been made in the procurement of the Formation Communication System. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The Formation Communication System is now known as project 'FALCON'. The Procurement Strategy was revised in 2000 to take account of Smart Procurement principles and is to purchase the FALCON equipment in successive increments, enabling the best value for money and the most up-to-date technology to be acquired for the armed forces. Invitations To Tender for a competitive Concept Phase to study the most appropriate technology and procurement options for the early FALCON trances were issued to six UK-based companies on 3 July 2000. Five responses were received. These have been assessed and it is intended to place four contracts later this year in order to study a range of different approaches to meeting the requirement.

Modernising Defence Initiative

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Modernising Defence initiative. [132177]

Mr. Hoon: Modernising Defence is not a single initiative; the term covers a number of areas of work where we are improving the management of defence.

This work builds on the modernisation and reshaping of our armed forces set out in the Strategic Defence Review. We are introducing a new Performance Management system, implementing Resource Accounting and Budgeting and conducting a review of our defence training needs.

Modernising Defence also includes the work of five project groups that were formed in the Ministry of Defence to seek ideas for ways to improve our policy formulation, to address the needs of our people, to explore ways for the Ministry of Defence to work more closely with other Government Departments, and other public sector bodies, to look at our information needs, and more generally to examine what people need to help them do their jobs. These groups have now made their recommendations, and these have been agreed by the Defence Management Board who have set in hand an action plan for implementation. The plan includes the formation of an External Relations Unit to act as a Gateway between Ministry of Defence and other Government Departments and regional bodies and the appointment of a new Director General for Information to draw together an Information Strategy for the Ministry of Defence.

Software Programmable Radios

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has to procure software programmable radios. [132179]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 23 October 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the procurement of software programmable radios. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

There are currently no plans to procure software programmable radios. Such technology is promising, but is not considered ready for implementation in UK programmes. In view of its potential, however, the MOD is investing in the underlying technology, through its Applied Research Programme.

MRAV Programme

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made on the MRAV programme; and if he will make a statement. [133836]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 23 October 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the Multi-Role Armoured Vehicle (MRAV). This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

A bilateral UK/German firm price contract for the development of MRAV was placed with the industrial consortium ARTEC GmbH on 5 November 1999, since when satisfactory progress has been made. So far there have been four programme milestones, covering ballistic plate trials, delivery of initial build standard documentation, delivery of management plans and acceptance of ergonomic mock ups. All four milestones were achieved on time.

MRAV will be procured through the quadrilateral Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR).

Future Carrier-Borne Aircraft

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the result of the Future Carrier-Borne Aircraft down selection; and if he will make a statement. [133837]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 23 October 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the down-selection of the Future Carrier Borne Aircraft (FCBA). This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

No decision has yet been made on how best to meet the FCBA requirement. A number of options remain under consideration of which the US-led Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) is a strong contender.

Under US plans, the down selection decision on which of the two competing JSF designs will enter the next phase of the programme, Engineering and Manufacturing Development, will not be taken until the latter part of next year.

I hope that this explains the position.

OCCAR Convention

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress he and his European counterparts have made in implementing the OCCAR Convention; and if he will list the projects that organisation will be overseeing. [133840]

Mr. Hoon: The OCCAR Convention was signed by the Defence Ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom in September 1998. Following the passage of the relevant legislation through Parliament earlier this year, the United Kingdom ratified the Convention on 3 May and deposited its instrument of ratification on 11 May. France and Germany have also completed the ratification process, and Italy has presented

the Convention to its Parliament. We expect Italy to complete the ratification process by the end of this year, after which OCCAR will have its own legal identity.

OCCAR is already responsible for the management of seven European collaborative defence equipment programmes under existing administrative arrangements. Two of these involve the UK: the Counter Battery Radar (COBRA) programme; and the Multi Role Armoured Vehicle (MRAV) programme. Other programmes will be integrated into OCCAR in due course, as appropriate.

Gurkhas

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what plans he has to recruit another battalion of Gurkhas; and if he will make a statement; [133880]

(2) how many Gurkha troops are serving in the Army; what percentage that is of British infantry; and if he will make a statement. [133875]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 191W, which stated that we have extended the Gurkha Reinforcement Companies and introduced a second Gurkha Engineer Squadron and Gurkha Signal Squadron. We have no current plans to recruit another Battalion of Gurkhas.

There are 3,357 Gurkhas currently serving with the British Army, of whom approximately 2,100 serve in an infantry role. This represents 7.7 per cent. of the whole Army infantry strength.

Ulster Defence Regiment

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many former members of the Ulster Defence Regiment whose claims for the Accumulated Service Medal were reviewed because of insufficient evidence were *(a)* successful and *(b)* unsuccessful in claiming the medal. [134152]

Dr. Moonie: A total of 327 such cases have been considered by the Army Medal Board to date. Of these, 256 have been successful, 54 proved to have no entitlement and were rejected, and 17 have been returned to the Regimental Headquarters of The Royal Irish Regiment for further investigation. An additional 821 applications, for the Accumulated Campaign Service Medal, have still to be prepared for Army Medal Board Consideration.

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what procedure was followed by the Honours and Distinction Committee to ascertain the eligibility of former members of the Ulster Defence Regiment claiming Accumulated Service Medals, but for whom the necessary records were not available. [134151]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer that my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces gave him on 18 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 425W.

Ro-ro Vessels

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on *(a)* the management, technical and financial innovation, *(b)* the cost and quality, *(c)* the value for money and *(d)* the competitiveness of the Cammell Laird component of the Maersk bid for ro-ro vessels. [133973]

Mr. Hoon: No decision on the strategic sealift competition has as yet been made and it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the bids at this stage of the competition.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the relationship between the partnership agreement between BAe systems and his Department on maintenance and repair work and orders for ro-ro vessels. [133942]

Dr. Moonie: There is no relationship between the orders for ro-ro vessels and the partnership agreements between the Department and BAe Systems for maintenance and repair work.

The vessels that provide the ro-ro service will be owned by a private company, who will also be responsible for the maintenance and repair of the vessels.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he intends to announce the winner of the roll-on roll-off vessel competition; and if he will give the in-service date of the vessels. [133838]

Mr. Hoon: No decision on the strategic sealift competition has as yet been made. I hope to make an announcement shortly. All six vessels are currently planned to be available by 2005.

Intrusive Diving

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what legal advice he has had from counsel on the activities of sport divers, in relation to the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986; and if he will make a statement on his policy on intrusive diving. [134179]

Dr. Moonie: A review of policy on wrecked military vessels is being undertaken at present. As part of this review we have looked at legal issues but it has not been necessary to seek advice from counsel as I had previously indicated. I will write to my hon. Friend when the review is complete and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

MK8 Gun System

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost was of development of the Mk 8 MOD 14.5 inch gun system; if the programme is running to schedule; what the original estimated cost and in-service date was; and if he will make a statement. [134142]

Dr. Moonie: Following initial development work at a cost of some £800,000, further development of the 4.5 inch Mk 8 MOD1 gun system is being conducted as part of a firm priced contract covering full development, initial update of eight units and support. The cost of this contract is commercially confidential and I am therefore withholding it in accordance with Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, which relates to Third Party's commercial confidences. The original estimated total development cost was in the order of £13 million. The development and initial

production programme is running to schedule and is on target to meet the first planned ship fitting of the modified gun system to HMS Norfolk in November 2000.

Maverick Programme

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the cost was of developing the AGM-6562 Maverick Medium Range air to surface missile for RAF use; how long this process has taken; and if he will make a statement; [134140]

(2) what the total cost is of the procurement of the AGM-6552 Maverick Programme; when deployment will take place; how long this programme is scheduled to last; how long the development programme was; and if he will make a statement. [134141]

Dr. Moonie: The AGM-65G2 Maverick Medium Range missile is a proven "off the shelf" missile. No development costs were incurred by the RAF. However, some £1.5 million was spent on aircraft integration and proof of concept work. The whole life cost of the Maverick programme is approximately £55 million, inclusive of VAT. This includes the cost of procurement, integration, training, and a Contractor Logistic Support package. The programme will last some five years, with the first missiles being deployed by the end of the year.

NATO Peace Shield 2000

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what UK forces took part in the NATO Peace Shield 2000 exercise; how many personnel were involved; and if he will make a statement. [134139]

Mr. Spellar: The UK participated in NATO exercise Peace Shield 2000 by sending two Reservist officers: one a member of the Education and Training Support branch of the Adjutant General Corps, and a Captain in the Intelligence Corps. Both officers operated in the brigade headquarters, in the logistics and the intelligence and operations divisions respectively. Both are high-grade linguists and were widely used as interpreters. Approximately 2,000 personnel from 21 nations took part.

Weapons Decommissioning

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much the UK has paid in the last five years to *(a)* help destroy and *(b)* make safe (i) chemical weapons, and (ii) stocks of plutonium; how long current programmes are scheduled to run; what the total cost is and from which budget the money has come; and if he will make a statement. [134135]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Future Army Concept Paper

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the Future Army Concept Paper. [132175]

Mr. Spellar: A declassified version of the Future Army Concept Paper 1999 has been placed in the Library of the House. This outlines the capabilities required by the Army in the 10–20 year time frame in the predicted future defence environment. It is underpinned by the principles and assumptions of the Strategic Defence Review and forms an important part of the Army's strategic planning process.

Link 16/JTIDS Terminals

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which UK military assets are equipped with Link 16/JTIDS terminals. [132180]

Dr. Moonie: Link 16/JTIDS terminals are currently fitted to the Tornado F3 and Sentry E3 aircraft and also to the UK Air Defence Ground Environment. Terminals were also fitted to a number of VC10 and Tristar Tanker aircraft in 1999 to meet an Urgent Operational Requirement in Kosovo.

We are planning to fit Link 16 terminals to a number of other Air, Naval and Army platforms, the primary ones being Sea Harrier FA2 aircraft, Sea King AEW Mk7 helicopter, Aircraft Carriers, Type 42 Destroyers, Type 45 Destroyers and Air Defence equipment. This will make a significant contribution to situational awareness for platform commanders. Other potential applications are also being studied.

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the companies and organisations which have expressed interest in future purchase No. N/SUB1/64247, interim land storage of radioactive waste from de-commissioned nuclear submarines. [132475]

Dr. Moonie: The following companies have provided written expressions of interest, in response to future purchase number N/SUB1/64247, for the interim land storage of radioactive waste from decommissioned nuclear submarines:

AEA Technology plc
WS Atkins Consultants Ltd.
Babtie Group Ltd.
BAE Systems Marine Ltd.
Babcock Rosyth Defence Ltd.
British Nuclear Fuels plc
Devonport Royal Dockyard Ltd.
European Nuclear Technologies Ltd.
Gibb Ltd.
Sir Robert McAlpine Ltd.
NNC Ltd.
Nuclear Technologies plc
NUKEM Nuclear Ltd.
Rolls Royce Power Engineering plc
Taylor Woodrow Construction Ltd.

Smart Procurement Initiative

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what savings his Department has achieved so far under the Smart Procurement Initiative; and what savings he expects to achieve up to July 2008. [133841]

Dr. Moonie: Over the three successive annual planning rounds since the inception of the Smart Procurement Initiative, we have identified costing reductions

attributable to Smart Procurement which total £2 billion over the 10-year period 1998 to 2008. We expect to improve on this in current and future planning rounds.

Armed Forces Voters

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he has taken to inform service personnel of the implications of section 7 of the Representation of the People Act 2000 for armed forces voters. [133730]

Mr. Spellar: A Joint Service Defence Council Instruction is being prepared to inform Service personnel and their dependants about the implications of the new electoral registration procedures. In addition, articles will be provided for Services' in-house news publications, appropriate families' and dependants' journals and single Service websites. A reference to section 7 of the RPA 2000 will be included, explaining to those with a Service qualification that they will have the option of either still registering annually to vote by means of a Service declaration, or registering in the same way as other voters if the appropriate residence criteria are met. The articles will complement the laying before Parliament of the regulations for electoral registration.

Marchwood Military Port

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the security implications for Marchwood Military Port of the siting of a container port and access roads thereto in its close vicinity. [133808]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence would have no objection in principle to any such development and indeed could see some operational advantages to the construction of such a container port. However, any such development would have to take careful account of the special requirements that would be associated with the construction of a civilian facility adjacent to a strategic military asset. In particular, we would need to review carefully the impact of security at the port, together with associated access and safety issues. If any such development were to be taken forward, the MOD would need to be involved at the earliest opportunity to ensure that the capability of this important military facility was not compromised. Necessarily, this would demand that the MOD's requirements were addressed fully within the planning process.

Submarine Reactor Fuel

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress made in extending the Wet Inlet Facility for storage of submarine reactor fuel at Sellafield. [134171]

Mr. Hoon: The new Wet Inlet Facility for the storage of spent submarine reactor fuel at Sellafield is on schedule to be fully operational by the original contract date of 1 December 2001.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if his Department was represented at the meeting held in Paris at the beginning of September on the health implications for servicemen and medical auxiliaries of inhalation of depleted uranium during Operation Granby in Kuwait/Iraq in 1991; and if he will examine the evidence presented at the Conference of the European Association of Nuclear Medicine by Professor Durakovic, of Georgetown University, on depleted uranium. [134170]

Mr. Spellar: My Department was not represented at the Annual Congress of the European Association of Nuclear Medicine in Paris on 3 September 2000. However, officials from my Department have seen copies of the slides that they understand were used by Dr. Durakovic during his presentation. The slides need further explanation by Dr. Durakovic to permit proper evaluation of his work. Dr. Durakovic will be invited by my Department to provide additional information.

Post Traumatic Stress

Mr. Neil Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel have left the armed forces as a result of post traumatic stress disorder brought on during service in the forces in each of the last five years; and what counselling services are available to service personnel involved in a traumatic situation. [134161]

Dr. Moonie: The numbers of personnel medically discharged from the Armed Forces in each of the last five years due solely or mainly to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are as follows:

Year	*Number*
1995	34
1996	27
1997	19
1998	18
1999	18

My Department fully recognises PTSD as a potentially serious and disabling medical condition. Personnel needing counselling or psychiatric treatment have access to the Community Psychiatric Service at units, out-patient care at the Royal Hospital Haslar and in or out-patient care at the Duchess of Kent's Psychiatric Hospital, Catterick. Measures are in place aimed at preventing PTSD occurring among Service personnel including briefings for personnel deployed on military operations and the availability of counselling during deployments.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Solicitor-General how many members of the Crown Prosecution Service have taken voluntary redundancy since the review of the Crown Prosecution Service; and for what reasons. [134003]

The Solicitor-General: Since the review of the Crown Prosecution Service, 20 members of that Department have taken voluntary redundancy. All have done so as a result of the organisational restructuring within the Department. By way of comparison, the Department currently has 6,383 members of staff in post.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Solicitor-General how many members of the Crown Prosecution Service have taken early retirement since the review of the Crown Prosecution Service; and for what reasons. [133943]

The Solicitor-General: Since the review of the Crown Prosecution Service, five members of that Department have taken early retirement. Of those, two have done so as a result of the organisational restructuring within the Department, a further two retired for personal reasons and the fifth retired on grounds of ill health. By way of comparison, the Department currently has 6,383 members of staff in post.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Sexual Services (Advertising)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what discussions he has had with the radio and television regulatory bodies regarding the use of radio and television to advertise sexual services; [133635]

(2) what powers he has to prevent the advertising by prostitutes on radio and television. [133636]

Janet Anderson: I wrote to my hon. Friend on 9 August and placed a copy of my letter in the Libraries of the House.

Table Tennis

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what powers he has to curtail Sport England's funding of table tennis. [134099]

Mr. Chris Smith: The way in which it allocates its grant-in-aid is primarily a matter for Sport England, subject to the terms and conditions of its Royal Charter and its Financial Memorandum, agreed with my Department. The Financial Memorandum provides that grant-in-aid is to be used by Sport England for the furtherance of its objects and the exercise of its powers within the terms of the Royal Charter, the Memorandum and of any other guidance or conditions, general statements on policy or directions issued by me.

Subject to these general constraints, the Financial Memorandum states that Sport England may determine how it spends its grant-in-aid without my prior approval, except in certain defined exceptional circumstances. The allocation of Lottery funding by Sport England is subject to general directions issued by me and specified types of funding may be prohibited by order.

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the error on pages 46 and 47 of the Government's annual report regarding the UK Sports Institute was first brought to his attention. [134100]

Mr. Chris Smith: The passage referred to in the Government's annual report could have been misleading, and certainly did not give a full picture of progress in the development of the UK Sports Institute.

To date, over £50 million of Lottery funding has been committed by Sport England to facilities for the English network of the UK Sports Institute. In May/June 2000, the water-based hockey pitches in Birmingham and Cannock were among the first completed new projects. Detailed designs and project development work have been undertaken for the network sites at Sheffield, Manchester, Bath and Loughborough. The Stage Two Lottery application for athletics, judo, netball, table tennis, and general facilities at Sheffield has already been approved. Many more projects are well advanced and it is expected that the majority of the remaining Lottery applications, representing over £60 million of further investment in network facilities in England, will be made in the next six months.

In addition, the UKSI—Scottish Institute of Sport, funded by Sport Scotland, has been established and operating for 18 months and the Sports Council for Wales has been operating and developing UKSI Cymru for some time. Both have been providing a range of services direct to athletes including technical training and support, conditioning guidance and supervision, preventive and reactive sports medical support and sports science.

Across the UK as a whole, the Athlete Career and Education programme (ACE UK) is up and running, providing personal development courses to athletes to meet their individual needs, as well as a high performance coaching programme introduced to provide a range of sport and coach specific personalised programmes in IT skills through to specific training sessions.

I am arranging for copies of the UKSI Quarterly Update report for August 2000—produced by UK Sport—to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses to provide further information on progress of the UK Sports Institute.

Football

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who is responsible for appointing the chairman of the Independent Football Commission; and what discussions he had in this regard with *(a)* football governing bodies, *(b)* football supporters groups and *(c)* the right hon. Member for Copeland, (Dr. Cunningham). [134123]

Mr. Chris Smith: As I announced on Friday 20 October, I have agreed to appoint the Chairman of the Independent Football Commission for his or her first term and I am now seeking applications for this post. I will select the preferred candidate on the advice of an appointments panel chaired by one of my officials as would be the case with a public appointment.

I have held a wide number of discussions about the recommendations of the Football Task Force with football governing bodies, football supporters groups and other interested parties including my right hon. Friend, the Member for Copeland, (Dr. Cunningham).

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on what date *(a)* the Millennium Commission and *(b)* the New Millennium Experience Company were advised that agreement had been reached with Dome Europe for the sale of the Millennium Dome. [134124]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) was informed of the Government's decision to make Dome Europe preferred bidder on 26 July. The Millennium Commission was informed at its meeting on 27 July.

Philharmonic Hall (Liverpool)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funding is being made available to Liverpool City Council in respect of the Philharmonic Hall in Liverpool. [133881]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I am aware of negotiations currently between Liverpool City Council and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society over the future running of the Philharmonic Hall. I am not aware that final conclusions have been reached. The question of whether additional funding would be available to the City Council is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Free Television Licences

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many pensioners will benefit from free television licences in Warrington, South this year. [133753]

Janet Anderson: Everyone aged 75 or over will be entitled to benefit from a free television licence from 1 November this year, but television licences cover households rather than individuals. Exact figures on the number of households which will benefit from the concession are not available. However, the 1991 Census New Parliamentary Constituency Monitor, published by the Office for National Statistics, shows the population of the Warrington, South constituency as 88,040, of which 2.2 per cent. were men aged 75 and over and 4.3 per cent. were women aged 75 and over.

Playing Fields

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many acres of *(a)* public and *(b)* school playing fields have been sold off in each year since 1997. [133989]

Kate Hoey: Information on the acreage of public playing fields sold since 1997 is not available. Sport England does however, monitor the number of planning applications concerning playing fields in its role as statutory consultee.

The Amendment to Section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act in October 1998, which was brought in to halt the previous Administration's policy of forcing schools to sell off playing fields, has introduced powers that require all state schools to seek consent for the sale of playing fields from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. In making his decision my right hon. Friend will take into account a number of criteria including consultation with the community and user groups, whether the proceeds will be used for education or used to enhance or improve sports provision, and whether the remaining playing fields fully meet the needs of local schools and the community.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment gave approval for the sale of 26.4 acres of school playing fields in England in 1998; 111.2 acres in 1999, and 60.9 acres in 2000.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what provision he has made to meet the needs of asylum seekers who have been victims of torture before arriving in the UK. [133823]

Mrs. Roche: All asylum seekers and their dependants are entitled to register with a doctor to receive medical treatment. Doctors can refer asylum seekers who have, or who it is believed may have, been tortured to specialist medical practitioners to enable them to receive appropriate treatment. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) may consider meeting the travel costs of asylum seekers supported by it who need to travel to the Medical Foundation for an initial assessment in connection with their application for asylum. NASS will also consider meeting the travel costs of an asylum seeker it is supporting in dispersed accommodation and who needs to travel to the Medical Foundation for specialist treatment following referral by their General Practitioner.

Alcohol

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 21 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 362–63W, (1) if he will assess the impact of the controls added to the drinks industry's code of practice on the merchandising and packaging of alcoholic drinks; [134074]

(2) about merchandising and packaging of alcoholic drinks, if he will assess the impact of the measures the drinks industry is taking to ensure alcohol is made less accessible to children. [134072]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Portman Group's Code of Practice, which is supported by the overwhelming majority of companies involved in the manufacture and sale of alcoholic drinks, has provided real and substantial benefits. The numbers of complaints and upheld complaints have both fallen; the findings of the independent panel, set up by the Group to consider complaints of breaches of the code, have enjoyed a high degree of compliance; and the Group's system of Retailer Alert Bulletins, advising retailers not to stock offending products in their original packaging, has reduced their availability to the public.

Other industry initiatives, including the development and distribution of proof of age cards, should be commended.

Nevertheless, it is a cause for great concern that, as separate research studies show, large numbers of children under 18 are able to buy alcohol, both in pubs and in retail outlets. It is for this reason that we have strongly supported the provisions strengthening the law on under-age sales included in the Private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Mr. Truswell); and that we have proposed to bring forward further measures to deal with the problem, including the test purchasing of alcohol, as set out in our White Paper "Time for Reform".

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with representatives of the drinks industry on the application of the code of practice on the naming of alcoholic products. [133972]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I meet representatives, which may include the Portman Group, from time to time, to discuss matters of current interest, which may include the operation of the Group's code of practice on the naming, packaging and merchandising of alcohol drinks.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 21 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 362–63W, about merchandising and packaging of alcoholic drinks, (1) what assessment he has made of the extent to which the provision in the Code of Practice about avoiding artificially bright colours in the product and the packaging has been implemented; [134071]

(2) if he will make a statement on how the taste and texture of beers, ciders and lagers are assessed when deciding if the product misleads about its true alcoholic nature. [134073]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Since September 1997, there have been five complaints that alcoholic products or their packaging have been more likely to appeal to under-18s than adults by reason of artificially bright colours. Of these complaints, two have been upheld by the independent complaints panel for the Portman Group's code of practice.

The panel has also upheld two complaints (one relating to the same product as one of the complaints mentioned above) where a product's texture contributed to its excessive appeal to under-18s.

It is a matter for the panel to decide how to take relevant factors such as texture into account when considering the question of a product's appeal to under-18s.

I understand that the code is likely to be reviewed next year.

Pedal Cycles

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) of 26 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 384–86W, if he will call for reports on the reasons for the absence of fixed penalties for carrying more than one person on a pedal cycle in *(a)* Avon and Somerset, *(b)* Bedfordshire, *(c)* Cambridgeshire, *(d)* Cheshire, *(e)* Derbyshire, *(f)* Durham, *(g)* Essex, *(h)* Gloucestershire, *(i)* Hertfordshire, *(j)* Humberside, *(k)* the City of London, *(l)* the Metropolitan Police area, *(m)* Norfolk, *(n)* Northamptonshire, *(o)* North Yorkshire, *(p)* Nottinghamshire, *(q)* South Yorkshire, *(r)* Staffordshire, *(s)* Surrey, *(t)* Sussex, *(u)* Warwickshire, *(v)* the West Midlands and *(w)* West Yorkshire, between 1 August and 31 December 1999. [134070]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The issuing of fixed penalties for cycling offences is an operational matter for individual chief officers of police. Data from Essex and Humberside have now been received and show that two and three fixed penalties were issued respectively for carrying more than one person on a pedal cycle for the period August to December 1999. Data have also now been received from West Yorkshire and show that one fixed penalty was issued for carrying more than one person on a pedal cycle for the period November to December 1999. Cambridgeshire cannot supply relevant data. The remaining forces have indicated that no fixed penalty notices were issued. I have no plans to call for reports in this instance from the forces referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell).

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), of 26 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 384–86W, if he will call for a report on the reason for the absence of fixed penalties for cycling on pedestrian footways in West Yorkshire between 1 August and 31 December 1999. [134069]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The issuing of fixed penalties for cycling offences is an operational matter for individual chief officers of police. Data from West Yorkshire have now been received and show that two fixed penalties were issued for the offence of cycling on the pavement in the period November to December 1999. No data are available for the period August to December 1999.

New fixed penalty offences—Number of substantive tickets issued, England and Wales, August to December 1999

Police force	*Carrying more than one person on pedal cycle*	*Cycling on the footway (pavement)*	*Registration mark defective*	*Overtaking at pelican, zebra or puffin crossing*	*Driving on footway (pavement)*	*Total*
Avon and Somerset	—	19	127	7	16	169
Bedfordshire	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cambridgeshire	—					
Cheshire	—	6	87	60	2	155
Cleveland	1	5	4	4	—	14
Cumbria	2	12	32	—	4	50
Derbyshire	—	3	5	—	3	11
Devon and Cornwall	1	28	20	—	4	53
Dorset	1	7	92	4	7	111
Durham	—	7	14	—	1	22
Essex	2	76	236	1	5	320
Gloucestershire	—	25	31	—	6	62
Greater Manchester	2	38	126	5	n/a	171
Hampshire	1	52	92	2	—	147
Hertfordshire	—	11	114	2	3	130

New fixed penalty offences—Number of substantive tickets issued, England and Wales, August to December 1999

Police force	*Carrying more than one person on pedal cycle*	*Cycling on the footway (pavement)*	*Registration mark defective*	*Overtaking at pelican, zebra or puffin crossing*	*Driving on footway (pavement)*	*Total*
Humberside	3	19	35	3	1	61
Kent	2	48	84	2	39	175
Lancashire	2	8	65	—	41	116
Leicestershire	1	13	30	—	2	46
Lincolnshire	9	15	118	1	3	146
London, City of	—	10	5	—	10	25
Merseyside	1	18	3	—	5	27
Metropolitan Police	—	29	109	22	8	168
Norfolk[2]	—	8	1	1	1	11
Northamptonshire	—	2	36	—	—	38
Northumbria	1	21	32	3	9	66
North Yorkshire	—	18	33	2	53	106
Nottinghamshire	—	5	146	—	2	153
South Yorkshire	—	11	219	12	61	303
Staffordshire[2]	—	3	27	4	—	34
Suffolk	2	53	30	—	—	85
Surrey	—	13	78	1	4	96
Sussex	—	15	5	—	—	20
Thames Valley	1	8	—	—	2	11
Warwickshire	—	2	16	—	2	20
West Mercia	1	36	87	4	5	133
West Midlands	—	4	12	1	1	18
West Yorkshire[1]	1	—	—	2	2	5
Wiltshire	—	6	17	—	1	24
Dyfed-Powys	—	7	—	—	1	8
Gwent	—	—	29	1	1	31
North Wales	n/a	n/a	—	—	34	34
South Wales	—	4	11	—	38	53
Total (42 forces)	34	665	2,208	144	377	3,428

[1] Included in column 2
[2] October to December only
[3] November to December only
[4] Figures not available

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to collect information, broken down by sub-division within each police authority, on the number of anti-social behaviour orders issued. [133595]

Mr. Boateng: As from 1 June this year, magistrates courts will be keeping records of the number of anti-social behaviour orders they issue in a form which can be collated centrally on a quarterly basis. The information centrally available under this system will be able to be broken down by petty sessions area, but not in the way suggested by my hon. Friend.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library a copy of the notes of the meeting on 27 October 1997 between the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire, (Mr. O'Brien), my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Noth Hythe, (Mr. Howard) and the hon. Member for North Thanet. [133941]

Mr. Straw: I have placed a copy of the meeting notes in the Library today.

Policing (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the funding for policing in Chorley was in each of the last three years. [133848]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been advised by the Chief Constable that Lancashire operates a system of devolved financial management whereby budgets are given both to Divisional Commanders (to run their policing division) and to Departmental Heads.

Chorley is part of Southern Division, one of six policing divisions in Lancashire Constabulary.

That part of the total Southern Division budget allocated to Chorley in the last three years was:

	£ million
1998–99	5.2
1999–2000	5.9
2000–01	6.1

These costs include police and support staff salaries and a proportion of other Divisional support costs.

The Chief Constable also tells me that a wide range of budgets/costs are incurred centrally such as those for Human Resources and Finance. In addition, there is a range of forcewide operational support functions such as an Intelligence Unit and an Operational Support Unit that

support divisional activity. The Chief Constable estimates that when these matters are taken into account, total funding for Chorley over the last three years would be as follows:

	£ million
1998–99	8.8
1999–2000	10.0
2000–01	10.4

Imaging Systems

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made since 24 July on his Department's acquisition of *(a)* through-the-wall imaging systems and *(b)* life signs monitoring systems; and if he will make a statement. [131787]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Trials of cell monitoring equipment were carried out by the Police Scientific Development Branch (PSDB) at Belmarsh Prison during 1999. The equipment failed after some time in situ and the trials were suspended. The Prison Service is reviewing this project and may ask PSDB to do further work.

Police Service (Former RUC Officers)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he has taken to encourage police services *(a)* in England and Wales and *(b)* in London to recruit from ranks of former RUC officer and reservists; what retraining facilities are available; and how many former RUC officers and reservists have been recruited in the last 12 months. [133543]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) may apply to transfer to forces in England and Wales. Officers recruited through inter-force transfers to police forces in England and Wales, and the London area are generally excluded from calculating recruitment for the purposes of determining Crime Fighting Fund (CFF) grant entitlement. It has been agreed to make an exception to this in the case of RUC officers.

Members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve Force (RUCR) are not members of the RUC and are therefore not eligible to transfer to any police force in England and Wales. They may apply to join forces in England and Wales subject to meeting the normal entry requirements of the force to which they apply.

Retraining is a matter for individual forces. They must assess what training is required for any transferees joining their force, paying particular attention to local (force) procedures.

No information is collected centrally on the number of police officers from the RUC who have transferred to police forces in England and Wales or the number of former RUC reservists who have been recruited to forces in England and Wales.

Criminal Cases (Police Conduct)

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action is taken against constabularies that are reported as failing to comply with the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996 by withholding unused material from defence lawyers in criminal cases. [130537]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[pursuant to his reply, 18 July 2000, Official Report, c. 164–65W]:* The first paragraph of my reply should have read as follows:

> The Government are aware of concerns about the operation of the disclosure provisions of the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996. Since the beginning of this year, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has received three letters from Members of Parliament and four from members of the public on this issue. Action is well under way to address these concerns.

SCOTLAND

RUC Officers and Reservists

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures he has taken to encourage police services to recruit from ranks of former RUC officer and reservists, what retraining facilities are available; and how many former RUC officers and reservists have been recruited in the last 12 months. [133517]

Dr. Reid: This is a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Retirement Age

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress made with the French authorities on recognising a standard pilot retirement age of 65; and when he expects a solution will be reached. [134195]

Mr. Mullin: I refer the hon. Member to my reply on 9 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 487W.

The French authorities have asked that the matter be raised with ICAO and we have been exploring with ICAO whether their age limit could be amended in line with that in JAR-OPS.

European Flag

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reasons underlie his policy of modifying regulations to allow the European flag to be flown without planning permission; what representations he has received on this issue; how many locations he expects will be affected; what manner of appeal locally will be possible; and if he will make a statement. [134184]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The UK is a member of the European Union. Our proposal would remove a layer of bureaucracy and make it easier for anyone who wants to fly the European Union flag to do so from any location where there is a flagstaff. Any national flags may already be flown without planning consent. The flying of the European Union flag would not be subject to planning restrictions therefore there would be no right of appeal. I have received four representations about this proposal, three from hon. Members and one from a member of the public.

Environmental Health Officers

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department is taking to ensure that there is an adequate supply of environmental health officers. [133866]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government give general grant funding to local authorities to enable them to meet their responsibilities, including environmental health. In the current Spending Review period from 2001–02 to 2003–04, standard spending assessments and Government grant to councils will increase in real terms by an average of over 3 per cent. a year. The Environment Protective and Cultural Services block settlement, which covers councils' responsibilities in this area, is the best for many years, with 1.8 per cent. real terms increases each year and 2.7 per cent. more in 2001–02 than previously planned.

At a local level, the extent of the funding for environmental health officers is, however, a matter for individual councils bearing in mind their statutory responsibilities, their priorities and the wishes of their electorate.

Waste Management

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the need for new or extended waste management facilities to enable waste disposal authorities in London to meet the target for diverting waste from landfill by 2005. [134061]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have made no assessment of the likely need for new or extended waste facilities in London. Any requirements for new or extended waste facilities in London are a matter for London boroughs as the relevant waste planning authorities. Any proposals for facilities to handle municipal waste must be consistent with the Mayor's municipal waste management strategy. Prior to publication of that strategy, proposals must be consistent with the national waste strategy, "Waste Strategy 2000".

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list sites identified in the Unitary Development Plans of London boroughs for possible major waste management schemes. [134066]

Mr. Meacher: Three Unitary Development Plans, those for Hammersmith and Fulham, Kingston and Merton, have site specific proposals for waste schemes, although only one (Hammersmith and Fulham) is for a new facility. Two other UDP's, Bexley and Croydon, have policies indicating their preferred locations for such facilities. Details are as follows:

Borough and latest UDP stage	*Sites identified for possible major waste schemes*
Royal Borough Kingston upon Thames (Adopted March 1998)	Improvement of refuse transfer facilities at the Athelstan Road Depot.
Merton UDP (Deposit draft September 1999)	23P Garth Road Depot Waste Treatment Facility (including buffer zone and environmental improvements).
Hammersmith and Fulham (Revised deposit June 2000)	Site 47 Imperial Road. Depot for waste recycling.
Croydon UDP (Adopted January 1997)	EP4 The development of large scale waste management facilities will only be appropriate in Purley Way North and South Industrial Areas.
Bexley UDP (Adopted July 1996)	Policy WS1 identifies four special industrial zones which could accommodate Waste facilities but not exclusively. One has subsequently been developed for the sludge incineration and the second one is subject to a current application with DTI.

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the case for imposing maximum *(a)* size and *(b)* capacity limits on particular types of waste management facilities; and if he will make a statement. [134064]

Mr. Meacher: The size and capacity of waste management facilities must be considered on a site by site basis, taking account of the location, quantity and nature of material to be dealt with, transport issues and other considerations. Government do not therefore consider it appropriate to impose constraints on the size or capacity of facilities. However, "Waste Strategy 2000" states that energy from waste plant should be appropriately-sized so as not to crowd out recycling.

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers planning authorities have to impose a moratorium on specific waste management options. [134058]

Mr. Meacher: Local planning authorities do not have powers to impose a moratorium on specific types of waste management facility. All planning applications for development should be decided by the local planning authority in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. In preparing their development plans, local planning authorities must have regard to Government policy and planning guidance, including that contained in "Waste Strategy 2000" and PPG10 "Planning and Waste Management".

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the waste disposal authorities in London that plan to let contracts for the transportation, treatment and disposal of their waste in the next two years. [134063]

Mr. Meacher: Waste disposal authorities are not required to notify my Department of the contracts they propose to let. However, the Greater London Authority Act 1999 requires waste authorities in London to provide the Mayor with certain information about existing and new waste contracts. I will ask the Mayor to write to the right hon. Member with the information they have to date.

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he will ensure that the Mayor of London's municipal waste strategy conforms with the principles and objectives of the "Waste Strategy 2000". [134057]

Mr. Meacher: The Greater London Authority Act 1999 requires that in preparing the municipal waste management strategy, the Mayor shall have regard to the national waste strategy, which is currently "Waste Strategy 2000", published in May 2000.

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he will issue to waste disposal authorities in London that will tender for their waste contracts in the next 12 months in respect of *(a)* promoting the use of rail and water transport and *(b)* attainment of the landfill diversion targets of the EU Landfill Directive and the national waste strategy; and if he will publish such guidance. [134062]

Mr. Meacher: Published guidance on promoting the use of rail and water transport for waste is available in the Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG9), the Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities (RPG3) and the Strategic Guidance for the River Thames (RPG3B/9B).

The Government have published guidance for local authorities on delivering best value for waste ("Waste Strategy Guidance Best Value and Waste Management" June 2000). We will shortly be publishing guidance to local authorities on developing Municipal Waste Management Strategies. We have no plans to issue further guidance on meeting landfill diversion targets or the national waste strategy.

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what co-operation he plans for work with the Mayor of London to safeguard and enhance use of the River Thames for the transportation of waste. [134065]

Mr. Meacher: Ministers and officials have frequent contact with the Mayor of London and his staff on a wide range of issues, including waste. However, the Greater London Authority Act 1999 requires the Mayor to produce a municipal waste management strategy for London. This shall have regard to the national waste strategy and be consistent with the Mayor's other strategies, which include spatial development and transport strategies. It should also have regard to the desirability of promoting and encouraging the use of the River Thames safely, in particular for the provision of passenger transport services and for the transportation of freight.

In preparing the Spatial Development Strategy the Mayor has to have regard to regional planning guidance issued by the Secretary of State. The draft Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG9) states a clear preference for the integration of sites of waste treatment and disposal with rail and water based transport systems wherever possible.

The Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities (RPG3) makes provision for boroughs to identify and safeguard suitable water or riverside sites for waste recycling, treatment and transfer facilities. This guidance remains extant until the final version of the Spatial Development Strategy is published. The Mayor should have regard to RPG in exercising his planning functions until that strategy has been published.

The Strategic Guidance for the River Thames (RPG3B/9B) requires local authorities to adopt policies in their development plans to encourage the use of the river for the transport of freight, including waste.

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects waste planning authorities to consider the need to provide for all forms of waste management, in line with the integrated approach required by "Waste Strategy 2000". [134060]

Mr. Meacher: Waste planning authorities should consider the need to make provision for all forms of waste management facilities when preparing or revising their waste development plans. The plans should take account of "Waste Strategy 2000", other relevant Government advice including national planning guidance in PPG10 "Planning and Waste Management" and the appropriate regional planning guidance.

Mr. Brooke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when "Waste Strategy 2000" became a material consideration for land-use planning purposes. [134059]

Mr. Meacher: "Waste Strategy 2000" became a material consideration for land-use planning purposes on its publication on 25 May 2000. Before that the draft waste strategy, "A Way with Waste" and the consultation paper "Less Waste More Value" published in July 1999 and June 1998, respectively were the relevant documents.

Pedal Cycles

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will estimate how many people in the United Kingdom use pedal cycles more than once a week; [134005]

(2) if he will estimate how many people in the United Kingdom own pedal cycles; [134007]

(3) if he will estimate how many people used a pedal cycle at least once a week in each of the last five years. [134004]

Mr. Hill: In Great Britain during the period 1998–99, 14 per cent. of respondents reported using a pedal cycle at least once a week, compared to 12 per cent. in 1989–91. Data on the frequency of use of pedal cycles were not collected on the National Travel Survey between 1992 and 1997.

Data for use of a pedal cycle more than once week are not collected on the National Travel Survey.

Data on individual ownership of pedal cycles are not held centrally. However, in the three year period 1997–99, 40 per cent. of households in Great Britain owned one or more pedal cycles (National Travel Survey).

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has under Local Transport Note 1/97 to codify the ways in which cyclists may use bus lanes; [134054]

(2) what plans he has to encourage local authorities to create more cycle ways in order to increase traffic flows in bus lanes. [134034]

Mr. Hill: The allocation of road space is a matter for the local Highway Authority. The Department issues advice to the Highway Authorities to encourage provision of cycle facilities and bus priority measures such as bus lanes.

The Local Transport Note 1/97, "Keeping Buses Moving 1997", provides advice about the introduction of bus priority measures, including bus lanes. For safety reasons it recommends that pedal cyclists be allowed to use bus lanes (this is the norm provided for in the Traffic Signs Regulation and General Directions 1994), unless there is a valid reason for their exclusion. The Department has no plans to codify ways in which cyclists may use bus lanes or for the introduction of cycle ways specifically to increase flows in bus lanes.

Mersey Partnerships

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what conclusions have been drawn from his Department's quarterly monitoring of the Mersey Partnerships' performance. [133944]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Mersey Partnership is currently on course to meet all its targets by 31 December 2000. This includes the key outputs and impact indicators of improving Merseyside's image both nationally and regionally, and securing investment with partners from inward investors initially handled by the Mersey Partnership.

Nuclear Regulation

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to request the NRPB to publish detailed advice to nuclear regulators and operators on the provisions of the Radioactive Substances (Basic Safety Standards) Directive in respect of the calculation of population doses from practices giving rise to radiation exposure. [133592]

Mr. Meacher: As a consequence of the Radioactive Substances (Basic Safety Standards) (England and Wales) Direction 2000 and the equivalent Direction made in Scotland, the regulators—the Environment Agency, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and the Environment and Heritage Service within the Northern Ireland Department of the Environment—in collaboration with the NRPB, are already developing guidance on the assessment of public doses for the purpose of authorising discharges of radioactive waste to the environment. This document will not only provide guidance to inspectors on the assessment of public doses and provide to operators guidance on the preparation of radiological assessments in support of authorisation applications, it will also provide information to the public on the regulators' methods of conducting public dose assessments. A public consultation exercise on the guidance commenced on 3 October. The guidance is expected to be published in Spring 2001.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage the commercial sector to improve its energy efficiency. [133593]

Mr. Meacher: We are reviewing the energy provisions of the Building Regulations. We are considering responses to a recently completed consultation exercise on proposals to raise building energy performance standards, including in the non-domestic sector.

The Government's Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme offers a range of information and advice to encourage the commercial sector to improve its energy efficiency. This includes site specific and design advice services, publications, seminars, workshops, board-level briefings and a help-line for small and medium businesses.

Under the programme, we are also seeking voluntary agreements with organisations that can enter into a commitment to energy savings for a specific sector or sub-sector. Agreements, such as that in place with the hospitality sector, will encourage greater energy awareness and accountability through targeted dissemination and better sharing of best practice.

In addition to the Energy Efficiency Best Practice programme, as part of the climate change levy package, £27 million has been allocated to the promotion of energy efficiency, the provision of impartial advice, and support for research, development and demonstration. Improving energy efficiency in commercial buildings offers much scope for carbon savings and therefore will be an important component of the expanded energy efficiency and carbon abatement programmes.

Marine Piracy

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to establish if ship tracking systems are reliable; what assessment he has made of the effect of such systems on the incidence of piracy; and what action he is taking with the International Maritime Organisation against piracy and armed robbery in international waters. [134180]

Mr. Hill: It is a fact that ship-tracking systems do work and serve their primary purpose of establishing the location of ships at sea using satellite technology. I understand that their widespread use can be taken as a good indicator of their reliability. Although my Department is not directly involved in assessing the effectiveness of such systems we have consulted the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) who have actively promoted use of the tracking system called 'Shiploc' as an effective counter piracy measure, particularly in cases where the objective is to steal the ship. This allows shipping companies to monitor their vessels' progress, to know quickly if the ship has a particular difficulty and to track it after an incident. IMB have advised my Department that, in their opinion, the system has deterrent value, although it is difficult to separate the direct benefits of this from those of the other measures which are being implemented to counter the piracy problem. Other ship tracking systems are also available on the market (e.g. Fleet Remote Monitoring System (FROM)). It is not

for the Department to promote any individual system, but we ensure that ship owners and operators are made aware of the options in our various contacts with them.

Over the past three years my Department has been active in supporting the International Maritime Organisation's (IMO) initiatives in countering the problem of piracy and armed robbery against ships at sea. These initiatives and actions include:

In partnership with the FCO, supporting the IMO counter piracy missions across the world with UK experts and finance in acknowledged piracy hotspots.

The UK is chairing an IMO Correspondence Group within the Maritime Safety Committee, which has produced an aide memoire on the procedures for the investigation and prosecution of piracy related incidents.

The UK initiated work in IMO to ensure that their Ship Registries have proper procedures in place for registration of ships as a means of preventing hijacking of vessels for fraudulent purposes.

Public Bodies (Access to Information)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the working of the Audit Commission Act 1998 as regards *(a)* access by the public to accounts of public bodies, *(b)* the grounds on which access to information can be withheld during the prescribed period of access and *(c)* the circumstances in which agreements between a public body and a private contractor can be withheld from inspection on grounds of confidentiality. [133948]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My right hon. Friend has made no assessment of the workings of the Audit Commission Act 1998 as regards access to information. We consider that the right of the public to inspect the accounts and supporting papers of local authorities is an important part of the overall accountability framework. It is the responsibility of each local authority to decide whether information on personal or contractual matters in any particular case is owed a degree of confidentiality and to act accordingly.

Departmental Initiatives

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 21 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 350W, if he will list all departmental initiatives between May 1997 and 18 July 2000 requiring bids from voluntary organisations and local authorities for funding, together with the total resources allocated to these initiatives, the number of successful bids and the proportion this represents of total bids received; and what data he collects on the average cost of preparing the bids for funding through each initiative. [133983]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The table lists and shows the spending on those Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions' initiatives that have required bids from voluntary organisations and local authorities to the Department for funding in 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000 and 2000–01.

£ million

Programme	*1997–98*[1]	*1998–99*[1]	*1999–2000*[1]	*2000–01*[2]
Special grants (regeneration)	0.9	1.1	1.4	1.4
Rough sleepers	15.2	17.5	24.9	30.6
Land reclamation[3]	49.5	53.3	33.1	6.3
Community Investment Fund[3]	4.8	6.3	3.8	1.4
Estates Renewal Challenge Fund	102.0	146.0	165.0	81.0
Single Regeneration Budget[4]	458.8	560.9	181.4	0.0
New Deal for Communities	0.0	0.2	48.5	120.7
Rural bus challenge[5]	0.0	1.6	4.7	20.0
Transport supplementary grant	194.9	155.5	158.0	21.8
Public transport facilities grant[6]	14.6	2.2	0.5	2.0
Industrial Development Act grant[6]	1.5	1.5	0.6	2.0
Transport credit approvals	443.3	367.9	470.6	777.9
Mobility Choice	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Community transport	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Environmental Action Fund	3.7	4.2	3.9	4.2
Capital Challenge Fund	146.9	246.5	208.0	0.0

[1] Actual outturn
[2] Provision
[3] Partial funding obtained from Non Departmental Public Bodies
[4] On 1 April 1999 the administration of the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) outside London transferred to the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). Figures for 1999–2000 relate only to the SRB in London, responsibility for which transferred to the London Development Agency in July 2000.
[5] Allocations were £11.4 million in 1998–1999 and £16.8 million in 1999–2000
[6] Figures may include non-voluntary private sector bodies
Note:
European Regional Development Fund funding made available through the department was as follows: £191.5 million—£229.4 million—£278.0 million—£332.5 million.

The other information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Housing Policy

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to require local authorities to publish written policies on housing people suffering *(a)* racial harassment and *(b)* domestic violence. [133820]

Mr. Mullin: My Department has made it clear in this year's Housing Investment Programme (HIP) guidance to local authorities that we will wish to see evidence that

authorities have robust measures in place to tackle racial harassment. My Department is also working closely with the Home Office, the lead Department on anti-social behaviour, to take forward the recommendations made by the Social Exclusion Unit's Policy Action Team (PAT) 8 on anti-social behaviour. One of those recommendations is that all social landlords should adopt a non-harassment clause in their tenancy agreements, and make clear the action that will be taken if the clause is breached.

This year's HIP guidance also makes it clear that my Department expects local housing authorities to set out in their housing strategy statements a comprehensive approach to addressing the housing and support needs of all vulnerable groups in the community—and this includes victims of domestic violence. Several recent Government publications, among them "Multi-agency guidance for addressing domestic violence" (March 2000) set out key issues which all agencies need to bear in mind, when developing their strategies with regard to domestic violence.

The Supporting people programme, which comes into effect in 2003, will require local authorities to audit the housing care and support needs of all vulnerable groups in their communities, and publish their strategies to meet these needs. The DETR/DoH/Women's unit has commissioned research on the availability of accommodation and support services for women accepted as homeless as a result of domestic violence. This research will collect information for the first time ever on the accommodation and support services provided by women's refuge groups and other providers, and measure households' satisfaction with the different accommodation and support needs available . The research project will produce guidance for local authorities on the option for meeting the needs of these households. This research and guidance will inform local authorities' strategies for Supporting People.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by what means he intends to evaluate pilot schemes for introducing choice into the letting of social housing; and if the results of these evaluations will be made public. [133819]

Mr. Mullin: We propose to commission researchers to work alongside the pilot authorities to monitor and evaluate the schemes and produce good practice guidance for social landlords drawing from the lessons learnt from the pilot schemes. We will be publishing the research findings and good practice guidance after the pilots are complete. We also plan to keep people informed about the progress of the pilot schemes during the implementation and evaluation process and will be issuing regular newsletters.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the consistency with which local authorities assess the vulnerability of homeless applicants under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996. [133821]

Mr. Mullin: Local housing authorities provide quarterly statistical returns to the DETR about statutory homelessness which include details of all applicants accepted as having a priority need for accommodation because they are vulnerable. These returns are monitored on a continual basis. The Department has also commissioned research into local authority policy and practice on housing allocation, transfers and homelessness. The research is due to be published later this year and includes some analysis of the consistency of local housing authorities assessment of the vulnerability of homeless applicants under Part VII of the Housing act 1996.

Transport Safety

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement in respect of safety protection required in the event of a frontal impact to *(a)* children and adults travelling on coaches and *(b)* children and adults travelling on a double or single decker bus if *(a)* sitting and *(b)* standing. [134186]

Mr. Hill: Other than the provisions for seat belts there are no specific safety requirements directed at frontal impact accidents in buses or coaches.

Seat belts must be available in coaches when groups of children are taken on organised trips. In coaches first used after 1 October 1988, whether adults or children are being carried, seat belts are required in the front passenger seats and in any rear seat which is not immediately behind a forward facing seat. Where a lap type seat belt is fitted to a seat the area in front must be soft or of other energy absorbing construction. Other than in these conditions the fitment and use of seat belts is optional. However, we recently consulted on the proposals to require seat belts to be provided in all new buses and coaches apart from those specifically designed to carry standing passengers. We plan that these requirements will take effect next year.

SSSIs

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the sites of special scientific interest that he intends to introduce following their designation by the European Union for *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales, *(c)* Scotland and *(d)* Northern Ireland. [134127]

Mr. Mullin: The selection of sites of special scientific interest is a devolved matter. In England statutory consultations on the notification or re-notification of 29 sites of special scientific interest (SSSI) are taking place in relation to possible special areas of conservation. These matters are being taken forward by English Nature to incorporate changes and additions in England to the UK list of candidate special areas of conservation transmitted, in accordance with the EC Habitats Directive, to the European Commission in July 1999. The sites are:

SSSI	*Administrative Area*
Arnecliff and Park Hole Woods	North Yorkshire
Blackstone Point	Devon
Bolton Fell Moss	Cumbria
Braithwaite Moss	Cumbria
Carricknath Point to Porthbean Beach	Cornwall
Dew's Ponds	Suffolk
Ewefell Mire	Cumbria
Frome St Quintin	Dorset
Haggs Bank	Cumbria
Hestercombe House	Somerset
Humber Flats and Marshes:	City of Kingston upon Hull
Upper Humber	East Riding of Yorkshire
	North Lincolnshire

SSSI	Administrative Area
Humber Flats and Marshes: Barton & Barrow Clay Pits	North Lincolnshire
Humber Flats and Marshes: The Grues	North Lincolnshire
Humber Flats and Marshes: Pyewipe and Cleethorpes Coast	North Lincolnshire North East Lincolnshire
Kirk Deighton	North Yorkshire
Little Wittenham	Oxfordshire
Lyppard Grange Ponds	Worcestershire
Mobberley and Oversley Ponds	Cheshire Manchester
Peter's Pit	Kent
River Itchen	City of Southampton Hampshire
River Kent and Tributaries	Cumbria
River Mease	Derbyshire Leicestershire Staffordshire
River Nent at Blagill	Cumbria
River Till	Wiltshire
Rochdale Canal	Rochdale Tameside
Sefton Coast	Sefton
St Austell Clay Pits	Cornwall
Whitesike Mine and Flinty Fell	Cumbria
Windsor Forest and Great Park	Bracknell Forest Surrey Windsor & Maidenhead

Air Accidents

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what circumstances the Air Accidents Investigation Board investigates military accidents. [134154]

Mr. Mullin: The AAIB provides assistance to military Boards of Inquiry convened to investigate the circumstances of aircraft accidents under the provisions of a Memorandum of Understanding that deals with mutual assistance between the AAIB and the Royal Air Force. The formal position of the AAIB Inspector is that of an adviser to the President of the Board of Inquiry. The role usually extends to providing assistance with the detailed examination of wreckage and the replay and analysis of any flight recorders fitted to the aircraft.

The Royal Air Force provides guidance to Presidents of Board of Inquiry about the circumstances in which it would be appropriate to seek the AAIB's assistance. These circumstances include accidents involving structural failure, fire in the air and any other circumstances where the immediate causes of the accident are unclear.

A259 Bypass

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the volume of long-distance east-west traffic along the South Coast which uses the M25 in preference to roads along the South Coast as indicated in his 1997 Roads Review Consultation Document, entitled "What Role for Trunk Roads in England"; and, in respect of the traffic studies being undertaken as part of the Access to Hastings Study, what estimate he has made of the volume of long-distance traffic which would transfer from the M25 to the A27 between Lewes-Polegate as a consequence of the construction in isolation of the A259 Hastings and Bexhill bypass. [133809]

Mr. Hill: No detailed work of this nature has yet been undertaken. Consideration of what further work is needed will be undertaken as part of the South Coast Corridor Multi-Modal Study process.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Orders in Council

Mr. Baker: To ask the President of the Council, pursuant to her answer to the hon. Member for Harwich (Mr. Henderson) of 12 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 582W, regarding Orders in Council, what plans she has to make Orders in Council available on the internet. [132071]

Mrs. Beckett: All Orders in Council will, once made, be listed on my Department's website: www.privy-council.org.uk.

Those Orders that are also statutory instruments will continue to be available from the Stationery Office, which is itself on-line: www.ukstate.com, those Orders that are not can, as at present, be obtained on request from my Department.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Divisions

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Council if she will list, for each parliamentary session from 1997–98 to date, the dates and times of divisions called after 11 pm, and the numbers voting in each lobby in each case. [132628]

Mrs. Beckett: The figures are set out in the tables. The date given is that of the sitting day concerned.

Divisions after 11 pm in Session 1997–98

Date	Time	Ayes	Noes
Tuesday 5 June 1997	12.10 am	246	32
Tuesday 5 June 1997	12.23 am	29	245
Monday 7 July 1997	11.11 pm	367	147
Monday 14 July 1997	11.39 pm	26	216
Monday 14 July 1997	12.17 am	26	174
Tuesday 9 December 1997	11.05 pm	303	31
Tuesday 9 December 1997	11.18 pm	262	57
Wednesday 10 December 1997	12.01 am	295	58
Wednesday 10 December 1997	12.20 am	331	18
Wednesday 17 December 1997	11.25 pm	352	144
Wednesday 4 February 1998	11.32 pm	174	26
Wednesday 4 February 1998	12.02 am	153	0
Tuesday 10 February 1998	11.30 pm	193	312
Wednesday 11 February 1998	12.56 am	245	181
Wednesday 11 February 1998	1.09 am	245	181
Wednesday 11 February 1998	1.23 am	236	25
Monday 9 March 1998	8.16 am	214	124
Monday 9 March 1998	9.13 am	150	11
Tuesday 24 March 1998	1.00 am	128	279
Tuesday 24 March 1998	3.34 am	45	220
Tuesday 24 March 1998	4.01 am	48	194
Tuesday 24 March 1998	5.38 am	211	15
Tuesday 24 March 1998	6.03 am	208	19
Tuesday 31 March 1998	11.08 pm	120	272
Tuesday 31 March 1998	11.24 pm	271	119

Divisions after 11 pm in Session 1997–98

Date	Time	Ayes	Noes
Wednesday 22 April 1998	11.14 pm	178	10
Tuesday 12 May 1998	11.02 pm	132	296
Wednesday 20 May 1998	11.01 pm	308	128
Wednesday 20 May 1998	11.15 pm	303	128
Monday 8 June 1998	11.13 pm	176	313
Monday 8 June 1998	11.28 pm	296	56
Monday 8 June 1998	11.39 pm	307	10
Tuesday 16 June 1998	11.55 pm	214	152
Tuesday 30 June 1998	11.21 pm	37	272
Wednesday 1 July 1998	11.03 pm	372	183
Wednesday 1 July 1998	11.16 pm	325	185
Wednesday 1 July 1998	11.54 pm	269	11
Monday 13 July 1998	12.14 am	300	168
Wednesday 15 July 1998	11.36 pm	275	130
Monday 27 July 1998	11.41 pm	135	3
Wednesday 29 July 1998	11.44 pm	219	86
Wednesday 2 September 1998	12.22 am	17	391
Wednesday 2 September 1998	2.49 am	43	199
Wednesday 2 September 1998	4.56 am	10	214
Wednesday 2 September 1998	6.38 am	220	24
Tuesday 10 November 1998	11.30 pm	116	293

Divisions after 11 pm in Session 1998–99

Date	Time	Ayes	Noes
Wednesday 2 December 1998	11.05 pm	266	117
Wednesday 2 December 1998	11.15 pm	262	116
Wednesday 2 December 1998	11.27 pm	257	121
Wednesday 2 December 1998	11.39 pm	254	122
Wednesday 24 February 1999	11.09 pm	165	140
Monday 15 March 1999	11.08 pm	372	137
Monday 15 March 1999	11.20 pm	365	137
Monday 15 March 1999	11.33 pm	350	142
Monday 15 March 1999	11.44 pm	350	140
Monday 15 March 1999	11.56 pm	351	132
Tuesday 16 March 1999	11.48 pm	281	24
Tuesday 16 March 1999	12.01 am	275	24
Tuesday 16 March 1999	12.12 am	248	9
Tuesday 16 March 1999	12.22 am	274	12
Tuesday 23 March 1999	11.47 pm	314	140
Tuesday 23 March 1999	12.03 am	314	132
Tuesday 30 March 1999	11.02 pm	123	320
Monday 17 May 1999	11.00 pm	375	182
Monday 17 May 1999	3.27 am	41	361
Monday 17 May 1999	3.41 am	41	360
Monday 17 May 1999	4.33 am	318	34
Monday 17 May 1999	4.47 am	314	21
Wednesday 16 June 1999	11.44 pm	143	326
Wednesday 16 June 1999	12.02 am	310	41
Tuesday 22 June 1999	11.54 pm	301	151
Monday 5 July 1999	11.30 pm	149	316
Tuesday 13 July 1999	11.12 pm	144	340
Tuesday 13 July 1999	11.55 pm	343	24
Wednesday 14 July 1999	11.18 pm	21	293
Wednesday 14 July 1999	11.37 pm	9	265
Monday 19 July 1999	12.21 am	220	9
Monday 19 July 1999	12.34 am	218	9
Monday 19 July 1999	12.46 am	195	7
Monday 19 July 1999	12.58 am	195	5
Monday 19 July 1999	1.07 am	194	7
Monday 19 July 1999	1.17 am	188	7
Monday 19 July 1999	1.28 am	184	7
Monday 19 July 1999	1.39 am	172	7
Monday 19 July 1999	1.52 am	162	7
Wednesday 3 November 1999	12.00 am	345	203
Wednesday 3 November 1999	12.13 am	344	166
Wednesday 3 November 1999	12.26 am	337	124
Wednesday 3 November 1999	12.39 am	311	104
Wednesday 3 November 1999	12.53 am	301	91
Wednesday 3 November 1999	1.07 am	297	76
Monday 8 November 1999	11.03 pm	311	33
Monday 8 November 1999	11.17 pm	306	27

Divisions after 11 pm in Session 1998–99

Date	Time	Ayes	Noes
Monday 8 November 1999	12.54 am	135	266
Monday 8 November 1999	1.08 am	276	9
Tuesday 9 November 1999	12.34 am	39	296
Wednesday 10 November 1999	11.04 pm	355	130
Wednesday 10 November 1999	1.32 am	331	28

Divisions after 11 pm in Session 1999–2000 (at 26 July)

Date	Time	Ayes	Noes
Wednesday 8 December 1999	11.30 pm	126	306
Tuesday 18 January 2000	11.30 pm	78	4
Tuesday 25 January 2000	11.03 pm	133	271
Tuesday 25 January 2000	11.20 pm	19	280
Tuesday 25 January 2000	11.30 pm	118	282
Tuesday 25 January 2000	3.20 am	13	243
Tuesday 25 January 2000	5.40 am	25	224
Tuesday 25 January 2000	5.50 am	221	24
Tuesday 25 January 2000	7.50 am	33	202
Tuesday 25 January 2000	9.30 am	13	234
Tuesday 25 January 2000	9.42 am	228	22
Tuesday 25 January 2000	2.00 pm	318	16
Tuesday 25 January 2000	4.55 pm	173	309
Tuesday 25 January 2000	5.15 pm	139	337
Tuesday 25 January 2000	7.20 pm	326	141
Wednesday 2 February 2000	11.45 pm	87	108
Monday 14 February 2000	11.05 pm	126	309
Tuesday 15 February 2000	11.30 pm	102	296
Tuesday 15 February 2000	1.00 am	262	168
Wednesday 16 February 2000	12.15 am	266	135
Tuesday 29 February 2000	11.00 pm	152	311
Tuesday 29 February 2000	2.05 am	27	253
Wednesday 8 March 2000	12.10 am	260	134
Wednesday 15 March 2000	11.08 pm	15	235
Wednesday 15 March 2000	11.20 pm	41	249
Wednesday 15 March 2000	12.50 am	35	239
Wednesday 15 March 2000	1.50 am	210	1
Monday 27 March 2000	11.07 pm	311	48
Monday 27 March 2000	11.18 pm	307	181
Monday 27 March 2000	11.30 pm	303	178
Monday 27 March 2000	11.41 pm	334	136
Monday 27 March 2000	11.57 pm	275	44
Wednesday 29 March 2000	11.30 pm	34	260
Monday 3 April 2000	12.30 am	141	265
Wednesday 5 April 2000	12.08 am	302	173
Tuesday 11 April 2000	1.02 am	130	190
Tuesday 11 April 2000	1.13 am	187	130
Wednesday 3 April 2000	11.12 pm	242	50
Tuesday 16 May 2000	11.55 pm	240	8
Monday 22 May 2000	11.54 pm	256	109
Monday 22 May 2000	12.54 am	6	227
Monday 5 June 2000	11.01 pm	287	114
Tuesday 20 June 2000	1.12 am	194	10
Tuesday 4 July 2000	11.00 pm	39	284
Tuesday 11 July 2000	11.40 pm	307	16
Tuesday 11 July 2000	11.52 pm	290	112
Tuesday 11 July 2000	12.05 am	293	109
Tuesday 11 July 2000	12.18 am	279	109
Tuesday 11 July 2000	12.31 am	249	128
Tuesday 11 July 2000	12.45 am	237	129
Thursday 13 July 2000	1.03 am	206	6
Monday 17 July 2000	11.36 pm	112	207
Monday 17 July 2000	11.50 pm	152	208
Tuesday 25 July 2000	1.38 am	381	36

Temporary Standing Orders

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Council what temporary standing orders of the House have been agreed since May 1997 which are not published in the Standing Orders, HC518. [132631]

Mrs. Beckett: None, other than the Sessional Orders passed as a matter of course at the beginning of each Session.

Select Committee Chairmanships

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Council what precedents there are since 1970 for a Minister of the Crown taking the Chair of a Select Committee, other than *(a)* those relating to Privileges of the House or conduct of individual hon. Members and *(b)* the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons. [132632]

Mrs. Beckett: As far as I am aware, there are no clear precedents, other than those mentioned, since 1970 (though there are earlier precedents). I am afraid the House's records are not held in a form which enables me to give a more definitive response.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Representation (Funding)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department on how many occasions the Lord Chancellor has *(a)* authorised and *(b)* refused requests for funding in exceptional individual cases under section 6(8)(b) of the Access to Justice Act 1999 for representation before (i) a tribunal, (ii) an inquest and (iii) a public inquiry. [133574]

Mr. Lock: Pursuant to my written answer of 26 July 2000 to the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), *Official Report*, column 716W, the Lord Chancellor's powers in respect of exceptional cases are as follows:

Under s.6(8)(a) of the Access to Justice Act, he may direct the Legal Services Commission to fund cases in circumstances specified in the direction. Under s.6(8)(b), he may authorise the Commission to fund cases in circumstances specified in the authorisation, and he may authorise funding in individual cases where the Commission asks him to do so. I refer the hon. Member to that written answer.

Telephone Steering Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many letters of *(a)* complaint and *(b)* approbation have been received with regard to the touch tone steering system installed in the Public Trust Office on its Mental Health Service inquiry line. [134043]

Jane Kennedy: To date the Public Trust Office has received one letter of complaint with regard to the use of the touch tone steering system and no letters of approbation.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what value for money studies have been carried out regarding the touch tone steering system installed in the Public Trust Office on its Mental Health Service inquiry line. [134041]

Jane Kennedy: The Public Trust Office did not carry out a value for money study in relation to the touch tone steering system prior to its introduction. The use of the touch tone steering system means that clients do not have to hold on the line when all they want to do is request forms, and offers immediate access to these services at all hours.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many touch tone steering systems employed in his Department involve premium rates. [134044]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department does not employ premium rate lines on any of its touch tone steering systems.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his answer of 11 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 511W, if he will estimate the cost of ascertaining how many telephones in The Court Service and Land Registry make use of touch tone steering systems. [134048]

Jane Kennedy: The cost of ascertaining how many telephones make use of touch tone steering systems has been estimated as £700 in respect of The Court Service and £985 in respect of the Land Registry.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what staff savings have been made as a result of the use of the touch tone steering system installed in the Public Record Office on its Family Records Centre inquiry line. [134047]

Mr. Lock: No staff savings have been made as a result of the use of the touch tone steering system installed in the Public Record Office on its Family Records Centre inquiry line. The steering system was installed to enable the Family Records Centre to cope with a significant increase in the number of telephone calls without increasing the size of its staff.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what staff savings have been made as a result of the use of the touch tone steering system installed in the Public Trust Office on its Mental Health Service inquiry line. [134042]

Jane Kennedy: The work generated from calls to the touch tone steering system can be scheduled around less busy periods, and so the Public Trust Office estimates that there has been a notional saving in the hours worked equivalent to one member of staff.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what value for money studies have been carried out regarding the touch tone steering system installed in the Public Record Office on its Family Record Centre inquiry line. [134046]

Mr. Lock: No value for money studies have been carried out regarding the touch-tone steering system on its Family Records Centre enquiry line. The decision to introduce the system was taken by the management because of evident need for action to maintain the best possible service within the available resources.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many letters of *(a)* complaint and *(b)* approbation have been received with regard to the touch tone steering system installed in the Public Record Office on its Family Record Centre inquiry line. [134045]

Mr. Lock: The Public Record Office received two letters of complaint about the touch-tone steering system on its Family Records Centre enquiry line. No letters of approbation have been received.

Public Trust Office

Mr. Colman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what consultation his Department has had with the Trustees of *(a)* the Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund and *(b)* the House of Commons Pension Fund about their losing the services of the Public Trust Office. [134032]

Jane Kennedy: The report of the Quinquennial Review of the Public Trust Office was circulated as a consultation document to a wide group of stakeholders and organisations with a potential interest. Copies of this report were placed in the Libraries of both Houses. On 14 November 1999 I sent copies to the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Mr. Butterfill) and to the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), the Chairmen of these funds, offering to meet them to discuss the changes. I wrote again to both MPs on this subject on 7 May. Throughout, Public Trust Office officials have been in communication with officials of these pension funds.

Mr. Colman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what continuing safeguards are to be in place to protect clients with less than £10,000 and their funds after those funds have been transferred elsewhere from the Public Trust Office. [134033]

Jane Kennedy: In cases where the Public Trustee is discharged as Receiver by the Court of Protection the Court must be satisfied that the client continues to be protected. In those cases where there is an external receiver (for example, a relative or solicitor), receivers are required to continue to keep a full record of transactions concluded on behalf of the client; the Court of Protection can call for an account at any time; and it is intended to call for an account in a percentage of these cases as a matter of administrative routine.

Mr. Colman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department where the replacement body for the Public Trust Office will be located. [134036]

Jane Kennedy: The replacement body for the Public Trust Office will be located in Greater London.

Mr. Colman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what measures he is taking to ensure that the cost to Public Trust Office clients does not increase if solicitors are appointed as last resort receivers and are permitted to charge on a timed basis. [134037]

Jane Kennedy: It is intended that the affairs of Public Trustee Receivership clients be transferred to a number of new service providers, not just solicitors. Where appropriate, the new receiver will be a family member (who will not charge a fee) or a local authority.

The appointment of a new receiver in Public Trustee Receivership cases is at the discretion of the Court of Protection and the Master of the Court will consider whether the appointment is in the best interests of the client. The expected costs of the new receiver will be considered by the Court as part of this process.

There is, however, a strong argument that clients should pay the market rate for work undertaken on their behalf if they can afford to do so. Where solicitors take on receivership work, charges are either on a fixed costs or on a timed basis. If the charge is on a timed basis, bills will be verified by the Supreme Court Costs Office to ensure that the number of hours billed is reasonable, and that the hourly rate is within the guidelines set.

Mr. Colman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what guarantees will be given to clients that losses to clients arising from fraud or mismanagement will continue to be made good when clients' investments currently managed by the Public Fund Office Receivership Division, Trust Division and Court Funds Office are managed by an external custodian; [134038]

(2) who will be responsible for the compensation given to Public Trust Office clients for losses on investments and fraud where such investments are made by an external custodian. [134039]

Jane Kennedy: Some of the Public Trust Office's existing clients already have assets held externally and, depending upon the arrangements, they may have recourse to statutory compensation schemes, and where appropriate, will be protected by the custodian's insurance policy. The regulatory authorities require companies undertaking custodian work to ensure that proper segregation of assets is maintained.

The Public Trust Office will ensure, in setting up any contract with external custodians, and on an ongoing basis, that rigorous auditing arrangements are in place to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements, and that companies have suitable insurance cover.

Mr. Colman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what level of staffing is proposed for the body replacing the Public Trust Office. [134035]

Jane Kennedy: Work is still proceeding to determine the exact size of the organisation that will replace the Public Trust Office so it is too early to give exact figures for the level of staffing that will be required. I shall, however, by the year end, be able to offer a specific estimate of the number of staff likely to be required for the new organisation as at April 2001. That number will be expected to reduce over time as the Public Trustee receivership work is transferred to other service providers and business efficiencies are implemented.

PRIME MINISTER

Hon. Members' Pay

Mr. Pound: To ask the Prime Minister what plans there are to review the arrangements for the pay of hon. Members and Ministers; and if he will make a statement. [134321]

The Prime Minister: A review of parliamentary pay carried out by the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) in 1996 included a recommendation, accepted by the Government, that parliamentary pay should be reviewed every three years, starting in 2000. The Chairman of the SSRB, Sir Michael Perry has informed the Government

that the SSRB are ready to undertake such a review. I have written to Sir Michael confirming that the Government would like to see the following areas covered in the report:

(i) the salary of Members of the House of Commons

(ii) the salaries of Ministers and other office-holders

(iii) the rate and structure of Peers' expenses allowances including the Secretarial allowance for Ministers and other paid office-holders in the House of Lords

(iv) the Office Costs Allowance in the House of Commons.

In addition, I have requested the SSRB to consider the present system of calculating the Resettlement Grant.

I look forward to receiving recommendations from the SSRB early next year.

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Pound: To ask the Prime Minister what additional projects are planned for the Performance and Innovation Unit. [134322]

The Prime Minister: I have asked the Performance and Innovation Unit to undertake a further project looking at privacy and data-sharing issues in the delivery of Government services.

Privacy and the protection of personal information has increased in importance with developments in IT. Data-sharing is a key to modernising government, to facilitating seamless electronic delivery of government services, to reducing fraud against government, and to encouraging e-commerce. This project will analyse a broad range of issues involved in privacy and data-sharing, including current government, private sector and international practices; structural and technological issues; public concerns; and the current legal parameters. The Performance and Innovation Unit aim to complete a report by early next year.

My noble Friend Lord Falconer of Thoroton is the Sponsor Minister.

European Council (Biarritz)

Mr. Pound: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the outcome of the informal European Council in Biarritz. [134323]

The Prime Minister: Together with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office I attended the Informal European Council in Biarritz on 13–14 October.

This informal European Council was asked to take stock of progress of the Inter-Governmental Conference on Treaty change. It was inevitably overshadowed by the violence in the Middle East. The European Council issued an appeal to both sides to end the violence and return to the Conference table. The Foreign Secretary, who had been in the Middle East, reported to his colleagues on his discussions in the region. Collectively, and individually, I and the Foreign Secretary and other European leaders were actively engaged behind the scenes at the European Council in trying to create the conditions in which the Sharm-el-Sheikh Summit could take place. The European Council asked Mr. Solana to return to the region and he represented the European Union at Sharm-el-Sheikh.

Members of the European Council also held a meeting with President Kostunica of Serbia. The European Union played a prominent role in pressurising the Milosevic regime. Its defeat represents a significant victory for democracy, not only in Serbia but throughout the Balkans and for Europe as a whole. The purpose of Saturday's meeting between EU Heads of Government and President Kostunica was to reaffirm our support for Serbian democracy. The European Council decided to make available 200 million euros of emergency aid for Serbia on top of the measures which were announced at the General Affairs Council on 9 October.

As far as the Inter-Governmental Conference was concerned, this was not a Summit at which decisions were to be taken. Political progress was, however, made towards the agreement which we want to see reached at the Nice Summit in December. That Summit will pave the way to the enlargement which has long been the objective of successive British Governments.

On the detail of these negotiations, I made clear our support for the extension of majority voting in the areas where this will benefit Britain, for example by enhancing the efficiency of the Single Market as well as the economic reform which we have, with others, consistently sought, while making clear that these areas did not include tax or social security.

The European Council agreed that there was a role for enhanced co-operation in an enlarged European Union. In other words, there is scope for some member states moving ahead on certain policies faster than others but these so-called enhanced co-operations must be genuinely open to all and must not undermine the existing policies of the Union, especially the Single Market. If these conditions are satisfied, the Government believe that enhanced co-operation can be useful in advancing the British agenda, for example in co-operation in common foreign and security policy within the framework of agreed policies and in co-operation in the fight against international crime and terrorism.

In this negotiation, Britain has a significant interest in seeing a reweighting of votes so that the position of the larger member states, which has deteriorated in relative terms with successive enlargements, is improved. That is also a necessary outcome of the negotiation if we are to agree to a reduction in the size of the Commission. This issue is sometimes seen as one in which the larger member states and the small member states have opposing interests. We believe it should be possible to reach an agreement which meets the interests of all.

The Charter of Rights so ably negotiated by my noble and learned Friend, Lord Goldsmith, was discussed by the Heads of Government who agreed that it should be adopted at the Nice European Council as a purely political declaration. It creates no legal obligations. It also sets out in a clear way a range of rights, freedoms and principles recognised within the EU which the EU institutions—the primary addressees—should respect when going about their daily business. It only applies to member states to the limited extent that they are implementing Union-wide laws. It has no application where national governments are acting purely within their own areas of national competence.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Brady: To ask the Prime Minister if he tabled proposals at the G8 summit in Japan for concerted action to be taken to encourage the Zimbabwe Government to desist from its programme of illegal seizures of white-owned farms. [133851]

The Prime Minister: No proposals specific to Zimbabwe were tabled at the G8 Summit. However, we have been in regular contact with members of the international community who share our concerns about the illegal occupation of farms in Zimbabwe. We have repeatedly urged the Government of Zimbabwe to take action to end the occupations and to restore the rule of law.

Private Sector Secondments

Dr. Brand: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the private sector companies from which secondments have been made to his Office since June 1997. [133879]

The Prime Minister: There have been no private sector secondments to my Office since June 1997.

Poverty

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on recent steps taken to alleviate poverty. [134128]

The Prime Minister: We recently published the second annual report on our strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion. "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (Cm 4865, September 2000), copies of which are available in the Library. This provides a detailed account of the action we have taken since we announced our strategy in September and what more we need to do. It clearly shows that we are already making a difference to people's lives and that real progress is being made in a number of key areas.

For example:

the number of children living in workless households has fallen by 250,000 during the period spring 1997 to spring 2000;

there are now over one million more people in work than in 1997 and unemployment levels are at their lowest levels for 20 years. Over one million people have participated in the New Deals and around a third of them have found work; and

the combined effects of the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG), Winter Fuel Payments and Free TV Licences for those aged 75 and over mean that a single pensioner in receipt of MIG is over £8 a week better off in real terms since 1997. And pensioner couples on MIG gain at least £11 a week.

This is only the beginning of a long-term strategy. We are laying the foundations for a society where no child lives in poverty and a society that offers opportunity for all.

Prisoners of War

Mr. Key: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement about the Government's review of ex gratia payments for former British prisoners of war of the Japanese. [133728]

The Prime Minister: The review is in progress. A decision is expected shortly.

TREASURY

EU Trade-related Agreements

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in what ways eligible third country exporters and producers will benefit from their participation in the import preferences granted their products under the EU's preferential trade-related agreements. [133750]

Dawn Primarolo: The EC's preferential trade agreements offer nil or much reduced rates of duty to qualifying products.

EC-Israel Trade Agreement

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of a failure to collect applicable duties on goods produced in Israeli settlements on their competitiveness in EU markets; and what impact the loss of customs revenues to the *(a)* Community and *(b)* UK Exchequer will have on (i) export sales and (ii) export pricing power for the settlement-based producers of those goods. [133710]

Dawn Primarolo: No such assessment has been made.

UK Customs are unable to forecast the impact on any overseas exporter where a potential loss of Community or UK Exchequer customs revenue arises.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 17 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 95W, and 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 267W, on the EC-Israel Trade Agreement, if the importation under preferences of goods produced in Israeli settlements reduces their landed cost in the EU; and what financial resources that should accrue to the Community and the UK treasuries thereby accrue to the operators engaged in the production and trade in such goods. [133751]

Dawn Primarolo: The UK is not aware of any circumstances in which financial resources which should accrue to the Community and the UK Treasury would accrue to exporters from Israeli Settlements.

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the Euro Made Easy programme of DGX of the European Commission; if a report has been submitted to the Council on the programme; and if he will make a statement. [134208]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Commission's 'Euro Made Easy' programme aims to produce information on the euro for those people who do not have easy access to traditional information flows.

I understand from the Commission that to date they have not submitted a report to the Council on this programme.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for how long sterling has maintained stability within the exchange rate mechanism bandwidth vis-à-vis the euro. [134209]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The UK does not participate in the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM).

Private Sector Secondments

Dr. Brand: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the private sector companies from which secondments have been made to his Department since June 1997. [133873]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) on 27 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 47W. Since that reply, the Department has engaged staff on secondment from Freshfields and Financial Services Authority.

Tax Arrears

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what powers of discretion the Paymaster General has over the payment of tax arrears. [133926]

Dawn Primarolo: Treasury Ministers do not intervene personally in the Revenue Departments' application of the tax law or their handling of particular cases. The Inland Revenue and HM Customs and Excise are independent from Treasury Ministers in administering the tax system and have specific statutory authority for care and management of the various taxes, under which they exercise discretion over the payment of tax arrears, subject to their fundamental responsibility for collecting the tax due.

Business Failures

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of *(a)* the number of businesses which failed in 1999 due to a tax demand from the Inland Revenue and *(b)* the cost of these failures to the Exchequer. [133885]

Dawn Primarolo: In the financial year ended 31 March 2000 the Inland Revenue's Enforcement Office obtained Bankruptcy and Winding-up orders in 2,219 cases. This represents around 5 per cent. of the total number of insolvencies in England and Wales in the same period.

Insolvency proceedings are taken only as a last resort by the Inland Revenue, after all other attempts to secure settlement or negotiate acceptable proposals for payment have failed. In considering such action they try to ensure a balance between the need to collect tax that is due, maintaining a level playing field for other businesses who pay on time, and a proper concern for the taxpayer to stay in business or earn enough to keep going.

Reports

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the reports submitted to his Department, by bodies that were created after May 1997 and that include significant and plural membership from outside the Civil Service, stating in each case the body writing the report, the date the report was submitted, how many recommendations were made, the number of those recommendations that have been implemented to date and the number of recommendations that have been rejected; and if he will make a statement. [133557]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Detailed information on reports submitted by each body, including the number of recommendations made; implemented and rejected, is not held centrally and could be supplied only at disproportionate cost.

Ministerial Directions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer concerning Ministerial Directions of 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 483W, if he will place full details of each Ministerial Direction of which the Treasury has been informed in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [133366]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Further to my answer of 24 July 2000, *OfficialReport*, column 483W, information on the Ministerial Directions referred to in that answer is as set out below.

Year	*Department*	*Subject of Direction*	*Category of Direction*
1990	ECGD	Sale of British Aerospace Hawk jets to Kenya	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1991	MOD	Chieftain Tank Replacement	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1991	ODA	Pergau Dam	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1992	MOD	HMS Endurance Replacement	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1992	MOD	Closure of depot at RNSD Copenacre	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1992	MAFF	Location of Divisional Offices	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1992	MOD	Image Intensifiers	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1993	ECGD	Guarantees for Export and Investments in Russia	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1995	MOD	Medium Support Helicopters	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1995	ECGD	ECGD Support to Jordan	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1995	DETR	Re-Examination of the Wreck of the Derbyshire	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1995	DETR—OPRAF	Decision on Profit Participation in the passenger rail franchising programme	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1995	DETR—OPRAF	Decision on Revenue Risk sharing in the passenger rail franchising programme	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1997	DETR	Channel Tunnel Rail Link and exceptional hardship	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1997	DETR	Millennium Exhibition: Expenditure to regenerate the Greenwich Peninsula and to provide a site for the Millennium Exhibition	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1998	DSS	Benefits Agency/Post Office Counters Ltd. (BA/POCL Automation Ltd.	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1998	DSS	Benefits Agency/Post Office Counters Ltd. BA/POCL Automation Ltd.	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1998	Northern Ireland Court Service	Concerns an individual's personnel records	Propriety/regularity
1998	MOD	Sale of Cadet Property in Moffat	Propriety/regularity
1998	DSS	Benefits Integrity Project	Propriety/regularity

Year	Department	Subject of Direction	Category of Direction
1999	DSS	Benefits Integrity Project	Propriety/regularity
1999	DSS	Benefits Integrity Project	Propriety/regularity
1999	ECGD	Cashmere Exporters	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
1999	ECGD	ECGD Cover Indonesia	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
2000	ECGD	ECGD Cover-Romania	Economy, efficiency and effectiveness
2000	MOD	Use of public funds to provide financial assistance to meet cost of air flight to Croatia for member of public to attend trial of those accused of murder of his son, a British Serviceman	Propriety/regularity

Note:
The number of Directions in 1999 notified to the Treasury was four, and not five as indicated in my earlier answer. In addition, a Ministerial Direction was made and notified to the Treasury after the hon. Member asked his question and this has been added to the table.

CABINET OFFICE

Late Payment

Mr. Efford: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what steps she has taken to ensure that Government organisations settle invoices within a 30 day period; [134105]

(2) what steps she has taken to ensure that small businesses automatically receive interest from Government organisations on late payments made after 30 days of being invoiced; [134103]

(3) what recent discussions she has had with ministerial colleagues on compensation for payment by public bodies after 30 days of invoices from small businesses. [134106]

Mr. Stringer: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given earlier today by my hon. Friend the Minister of State for Trade and Industry.

Telephone Steering Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many letters of *(a)* complaint and *(b)* approbation have been received with regard to the touch tone steering system installed on her office's public inquiry line. [134050]

Mr. Stringer: There are no records of any letters of complaint or approbation received.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if the touch tone steering system installed on her office's public inquiry line charges premium rates. [134049]

Mr. Stringer: The system does not charge premium rates.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what staff savings have been made as a result of the use of the touch tone steering system installed on her office's public inquiry line. [134051]

Mr. Stringer: The system was implemented as an additional service and has, therefore, not resulted in any staff savings.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what value for money studies have been carried out regarding the touch tone steering system installed on her Office's public inquiry line. [134053]

Mr. Stringer: To date, no value for money studies have been considered necessary for what is, essentially, a simple routing system to different operators.

Private Sector Secondments

Dr. Brand: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the private sector companies from which secondments have been made to her Department since June 1997. [133871]

Mr. Stringer: During the period June 1997 to August 2000 there have been 20 private sector companies from which secondments have been made into the Cabinet Office. They are as listed;

Anderson Consulting
Barclays Bank plc
British Airways
BT
Carillion
Energis
Frontier Economics
Hay Management Consultants
KPMG
Lloyds Bank plc
Marks & Spencer
McKinsey & Co.
Microsoft Corporation
Nat West Bank plc
Oracle plc
PriceWaterhouseCoopers
Sun Microsystems
Unilever
Wragge & Co.
Zurich Financial Services.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients on NHS waiting lists in Gloucestershire who would normally have been treated within the South West Region have been treated elsewhere in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [125546]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not collected centrally. The hon. Member may wish to contact Mr. Chris Creswick, Chairman of Gloucestershire Health Authority, for information on this matter.

NHS Costs

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the total cost to the NHS was of treating sexually transmitted diseases including in-patient and outpatient treatment and prevention in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999; [126839]

(2) what the total cost was of providing abortions on the NHS in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999; [126826]

(3) what the cost was to the NHS of treating cancer of the cervix and other cervical abnormalities in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999; [126840]

(4) what the cost to the NHS was of infertility treatment in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* 1999; and of this, how much was as a consequence of previous sexually-transmitted disease, with particular reference to chlamydia. [126841]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not available centrally.

Sterilisation

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, how many *(a)* sterilisations and *(b)* reversals of sterilisation were carried out by the NHS in (i) 1970, (ii) 1980, (iii) 1990 and (iv) 1999; how many were requested as a result of people getting married or acquiring new partners; and what the total cost to the NHS was in each of those years. [126838]

Yvette Cooper *[pursuant to her reply, 3 July 2000, c. 39W]:* I regret that the information I gave in the table in my previous reply was incorrect. It should read:

Procedure	*1980*[1]	*1990–91*	*1998–99*
Female sterilisation	16,954	44,904	48,194
Female sterilisation reversal	6,831	1,556	699
Male sterilisation	39,270	36,670	35,609
Male sterilisation reversal	890	1,745	896

[1] 1980 data were collected via the Hospital In-Patient Inquiry which was based on a 1 in 10 sample of discharges and deaths from non-Psychiatric and non-Maternity NHS Hospitals in England.

Cardiac Surgery

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients are awaiting cardiac surgery in *(a)* Teeside Region and *(b)* Middlesborough, South and Cleveland East; and if he will make a statement. [130502]

Mr. Denham: At the end of March 2000, 291 patients in the Tees Health Authority area were waiting for elective admission to a consultant whose main speciality is cardiothoracic surgery. Cardiothoracic surgery includes heart and lung surgery. The information is not collected at constituency level.

Traffic Wardens

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will have discussions with London borough councils with a view to stopping traffic wardens issuing parking tickets to the vehicles of nurses displaying a notice indicating that they are attending to patients in their homes; and if he will make a statement. [133421]

Mr. Hill: I have been asked to reply.

We recognise the parking problems faced by doctors and other healthcare workers including nurses who are required to make home visits. A system to provide concessionary parking for these workers on emergency calls is currently in operation. It is called the Health Emergency Badge. The general attitude of the London Boroughs to routine visits is that these workers must plan time to park legally and pay the relevant fees (for which they may then receive reimbursement from their employer). Whether or not some routine work should be excused from normal parking rules is down to individual London Boroughs.

National Poisons Information Service

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the members of the National Poisons Information Service Board; and how details of their meeting schedule, agendas and minutes can be obtained; [127020]

(2) what reason the National Poisons Information Service has not submitted its annual reports, due in July 1999 and March 2000, to his Department; and what steps he has taken to ensure that the contractual commitments of the NPIS have been delivered; [127022]

(3) what were the terms of the contracts between his Department and the National Poisons Information Service between 1995 and the current year. [127023]

Yvette Cooper *[pursuant to her reply, 28 June 2000, c. 510–11]:* I regret that there was an error in my previous reply. The calendar year referred to in the last paragraph of the reply should read 1997.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 28 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 511–12W, (1) if he will place in the Library a copy of the outstanding National Poisons Information Service Centre reports for the year 1999–2000 that were scheduled to be completed by the end of June; [133299]

(2) if he will make it his policy to allow a lay representative on the National Poisons Information Service; [133288]

(3) if he will place in the Library the reports made by the National Poisons Information Service Centre to comply with the provisions of European Commission Resolution 90/C 329/03. [133300]

Yvette Cooper *[pursuant to her reply, 28 July 2000, c. 1000]:* I regret that there was an error in my previous reply. The year of the last report referred to in the last paragraph of the reply should read (1997).

Vaccines (Bovine Material)

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information his Department has obtained concerning the use of bovine material in the manufacture of vaccines. [134324]

Yvette Cooper: European guidelines issued in 1999 made clear that the manufacturing process for medicinal products should not use bovine materials from countries in which there are known cases of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy. The first guidance on this subject was issued by the Committee on Safety of Medicines in 1989. From 1989 onwards, the Medicines Control Agency

sought and received assurances from drug companies that they were implementing this guidance and subsequent guidance produced at a European level on a phased basis.

On the advice of the MCA, my noble Friend the Under-Secretary, Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, informed the House on 4 May 2000 that the 1989 guidelines obliged all pharmaceutical companies to source bovine material from outside the United Kingdom. My noble Friend is now advised by the MCA that these 1989 guidelines did not have the full force of law and that they applied to injectable medicines and medicines applied to the eyes or open wounds. However, the 1999 guidelines do apply to bovine materials and pharmaceuticals generally. From March 2001, these guidelines, which at present are not legally binding, will have the full force of the law.

My noble Friend also informed the House on 4 May 2000 that vaccines that use bovine material in the manufacturing process manufactured since March 1989 had used bovine material from non-UK sources and that the MCA had established that the latest date that vaccines manufactured before the guidelines came into force could have been used was November 1993. On 28 March 2000, I informed Parliament on the advice of the MCA that from April 1989 no bovine materials sourced in the United Kingdom were introduced as an element of the manufacturing process for vaccines produced at that time. In particular I told the House on the advice of the MCA that all vaccines manufactured by Wellcome after 1989 used bovine material from New Zealand. I also informed the House on 19 October 1999 on the advice of the MCA that since 1993 all vaccines in use were manufactured without UK-sourced bovine material. I have now been advised that the advice from the MCA that formed the basis of these statements was incorrect. The MCA was provided with information by manufacturers.

The MCA advised Ministers last week that in the case of the Wellcome oral polio vaccine, the assurances given by the company have proved inaccurate. This oral polio vaccine was originally produced by Wellcome. Part of Wellcome's vaccine business was transferred over to Medeva in 1991. Part of the oral polio vaccine was manufactured in 1985 using growth medium containing fetal calf serum of UK bovine origin, and this element continued to be used in the production process after 1989.

This oral polio vaccine continued to be use up until 2000, in specific breach of the 1999 guidance. The Department of Health has therefore recalled this oral polio vaccine manufactured by Medeva (supplied by Medeva under the brand name Evans).

The MCA have carried out a risk assessment and people who have received this oral polio vaccine in the past can be advised that the breach is of guidance which has been formulated on a precautionary basis; under the European guidelines, fetal calf serum is in category IV (no detectable infectivity); the processes used in manufacturing are designed to remove all but a remote trace of unwanted proteins such as fetal calf serum. The MCA, taking all these points together, have advised that any risk associated with this Medeva oral polio vaccine is incalculably small.

I asked the CSM in March to produce a comprehensiye assessment of BSE-related issues in vaccines. The Government are committed to publishing the assessment. In the light of the new information we are also reviewing the advice given to Ministers on this issue to ensure that all the information given to Parliament is correct.

Scientists

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to improve recruitment and retention of biomedical scientists; and if he will make a statement. [134001]

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps are being taken to improve the morale of *(a)* biomedical scientists and *(b)* other staff who work in the NHS pathology services. [134006]

Mr. Denham: The national recruitment, retention and vacancy survey published September 2000 gave us the latest authoritative data on staff vacancies from 100 per cent. of National Health Service trusts. It shows that 2.6 per cent. of other scientific, technical and therapeutic posts have been vacant for 3 months or more (in England). We are ensuring that effective recruitment and retention policies are in place to make the best use of trained staff, including biomedical scientists and other pathology staff, and that training levels are sufficient to get a better match between supply and demand.

In October, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State published the performance management framework for human resources for the whole of the NHS. The way employers treat their staff will in future be part of the core performance measures and linked to the financial resources they receive. Included in the framework is the improving working lives standard which summarises the commitment expected from employers to create well-managed, flexible working environments that support staff, promote their welfare and development, tackle violence and racism, and respect their need to manage a health and productive work/life balance.

In July 2000, a new careers recruitment leaflet was produced for scientists and technicians and the NHS careers information service was extended to include scientists and technicians (0845 6060655 or www.nhs.uk/careers)

For 1999–2000, to help improve recruitment and retention, newly qualified biomedical scientists received pay increases of 7.1 per cent; trainee biomedical scientists up to 26 per cent; newly qualified cytology screeners up to 11.4 per cent; and trainee cytology screeners up to 6.6 per cent. For 2000–01, all NHS pathology staff received increases of 3.25 per cent. or £300, whichever is the higher, and a formula for 2001–02 is agreed.

As for the future on pay, the NHS pay system is in need of modernisation. We are working in partnership with trades unions to negotiate a new pay system which will offer NHS staff a more attractive career structure and which will enhance recruitment and retention.

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when medical laboratory scientific officers will be brought within the scope of the Pay Review Body. [134000]

Mr. Denham: Our proposals for modernising National Health Service pay which were published in February 1999 in "Agenda for Change", include bringing some

groups of highly qualified staff within the scope of the Nursing Pay Review Body, without changing its fundamentally professional character.

Initial discussions with NHS trade unions on pay modernisation resulted in the "Joint Framework of Principles and Agreed Statement on the Way Forward", which was published on 8 October 1999. This sets out the following starting point for more detailed discussions with trade unions on the qualifying criteria for groups to come within the scope of the NPRB:

> Professions with a minimum entry requirement of three years educational study (or equivalent) to diploma level or higher, in a health specific area (other than medicine or dentistry) and which are state registered and have a substantial majority of members employed in health care.
>
> Exceptions might be agreed for staff groups which met the majority but not all of these conditions.
>
> Staff groups which support professions added to the NPRB remit, and who have a direct connection with the transferred groups similar to that between nursing auxiliaries and registered nurses would also need to be considered for transfer.

The widening of the membership of the review body is conditional upon an agreement being reached in the current talks about pay modernisation.

Consultants' Pay

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase basic pay for consultants in the first few years of practice to compensate for the prohibition on private work. [133812]

Ms Stuart: The proposals set out in the National Health Service Plan will be discussed as part of the negotiations on the new consultant contract.

NHS Appointments

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will set out the composition and terms of reference of the new independent commission for NHS appointments, stating the means by which members of the commission will be chosen. [133868]

Ms Stuart: The National Health Service Appointments Commission will be a special health authority, with members appointed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State following open competition in accordance with the guidelines issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. It is intended that the Commission will be operational by 1 April 2001. Its precise terms of reference are currently being determined.

Private Healthcare

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the extent to which the UK private healthcare sector will expand as a result of the NHS national plan. [133811]

Ms Stuart: We are unable to say what expansion there may or may not be in private health care. That is a matter for the private healthcare industry itself.

The National Health Service Plan indicates a closer working relationship between the two sectors. In some instances the private and voluntary healthcare sector can supplement NHS services and it makes sense to ensure this is undertaken effectively. That is why the NHS Plan outlines a change in the way the NHS and the private sector will work together.

Hospital Waiting Times

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in the Mid Essex Hospital Trust area were waiting *(a)* for in-patient treatment in the last three months *(b)* more than 12 months for in-patient treatment in the last three months and *(c)* 13 weeks or more for an out-patient appointment in the last two quarters. [134168]

Mr. Denham: Total number of patients waiting and the number of patients waiting over 12 months for hospital treatment at Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust in the last three months

Month	*Total number of patients waiting*	*Number of patients waiting over 12 months*
June 2000	10,154	924
July 2000	9,703	876
August 2000	9,405	795

Source:
Monthly returns

Total number of patients waiting 13 weeks or more for an outpatient appointment at Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust

Month	*Number of patients waiting over 13 weeks*
Q4 1999–00	2,924
Q1 2000–01	3,212

Source:
QM08 quarterly return

Telephone Steering Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many individual lines are operated as part of the touch tone steering system installed in his Department's public inquiry office. [134055]

Ms Stuart: Five individual agent's lines are operated as part of the Automated Call Distribution (ACD) system, plus one supervisor line.

The ACD system has the ability to queue calls in excess of the six lines available, the maximum number of which is dependent upon the loading on the switch at the time the call is placed.

Eight lines are operated to provide messaging services at pre-determined times (such as to provide the out of hours messages).

Bury Health Care NHS Trust

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the figures for the increases in revenue income to Bury Health Care NHS Trust for *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000 will be made available. [133596]

Mr. Denham: The revenue income for Bury Health Care National Health Service Trust for the years 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is as follows:

	1998–99	*1999–2000*
Final accounts (£ million)	63.4	—
£ increase on 1997–98 (£ million)	4.4	—
Percentage increase on 1997–98	7.54	—
Final accounts (£ million)	—	76.9
£ increase on 1998–99 (£ million)	—	13.5
Percentage increase on 1998–99	—	21.29

Note:
1. The 1999–2000 figure includes impairment income of £7.4 million
2. The source of this information is the published final accounts

Breast Cancer Services (Nottingham)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with Trent Regional Health Authority regarding plans for a new breast cancer unit at Nottingham City Hospital; and when he expects an announcement. [133827]

Yvette Cooper: The Trent Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive continues to work with the Nottingham City Hospital NHS Trust to take forward its proposal for a new breast care centre. The outline business case was approved by the regional office on 15 May 2000. It is expected that the full business case will be submitted in March 2001.

The development of the breast cancer unit is considered to be a high priority by both the regional office and the Nottingham health community.

Tobacco Control

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact on UK tobacco manufacturers of the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control. [133831]

Yvette Cooper: It is too early to say what the likely impact of the Convention on employment and exports will be, as this depends on the content of the Convention, which is yet to be negotiated. Provisional texts of draft elements for the Convention have been drawn up and are being considered at the First Session of the Inter Governmental Negotiating Body in Geneva between 16–21 October. Negotiations are unlikely to be concluded before 2002.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will conduct an economic impact assessment of the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control; and if he will make a statement. [133835]

Yvette Cooper: It is too early to do this at present but we will do so when we have a clearer idea of what commitments the UK may wish to enter into.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the World Health Organisation about the private sector funding of its Framework Convention on Tobacco Control; and if he will list those companies which have contributed. [133832]

Yvette Cooper: We have had no such discussions.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what Her Majesty's Government's objectives are in discussions on the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control; and if he will make a statement. [133884]

Yvette Cooper: We support the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and believe that it can help to reduce the damage to health caused by tobacco products worldwide. The WHO estimates that tobacco kills four million people each year and that this figure is likely to increase substantially, particularly in the developing world.

The United Kingdom intends to play an active part in negotiating a convention which in particular will:

make a difference by imposing obligations on its signatories, but which is not so ambitious that few countries sign up;

tackles areas where international action is necessary and which can impact on consumption in the UK—in particular advertising and smuggling;

supports other countries in developing tobacco control strategies;

does not impose over-prescriptive obligations in areas which we consider to be for national decisions.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what meetings he has held in preparation for the negotiations on the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control. [133882]

Yvette Cooper: Ministers have consulted colleagues from other countries. Officials have participated in all WHO and European Union preparatory meetings on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of the adoption of the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control on jobs in each constituency. [133826]

Yvette Cooper: It is too early to say what the likely impact of the Convention on employment and exports will be, as this depends on the content of the Convention, which is yet to be negotiated.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with UK tobacco companies about the economic impact on companies and the communities in which they are located of the possible adoption of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. [133833]

Yvette Cooper: We have had no such discussions.

Larval Therapy

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* maggot-treated and *(b)* conventionally treated ulcers were evaluated by specialists at the West Cumberland Hospital in the study of use of maggots in larval therapy; and if he will make a statement. [134131]

Mr. Denham: The West Cumbria Health Care National Health Service Trust study into larval therapy evaluated six patients who received maggot treatment for their ulcers and six patients who received conventional ulcer treatment.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent guidelines have been set by health authorities in testing larval therapy; what

preventive measures are included in studies to ensure the safety of human volunteers; and if he will make a statement; [134129]

(2) what is the cost of his study on larval therapy; and if he will make a statement on potential NHS budget gains associated with such therapy. [134130]

Mr. Denham: Protocols for clinical research on the effectiveness of larval therapy in the National Health Service have to have the approval of Research Ethics Committees and the relevant NHS authority before they can proceed.

Larval therapy is part of the wound care appraisal currently being undertaken by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The appraisal will determine the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of debriding agents in treating difficult to heal surgical wounds. It will also evaluate the clinical and cost effectiveness of treating patients with difficult to heal surgical wounds by means of specialist wound care (eg at specialised wound care clinics) as compared to conventional care. NICE will review the available research evidence but will not itself commission further clinical research. NICE are expected to report on this appraisal in spring 2001.

Zyban

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines have been given to health authorities for the prescribing of the drug Zyban; and which health authorities allow GPs to prescribe this drug. [134133]

Mr. Denham: The Department issued guidance to local smoking cessation co-ordinators on 28 June, which was copied to health authority prescribing advisers, copies of which have been placed in the Library. The NHS Plan announced that NICE will be asked to advise general practitioners on the most appropriate and cost-effective prescribing regimes for nicotine replacement therapy and Zyban, including duration and targeting. All general practitioners across England may prescribe bupropion (Zyban) to smokers motivated to quit for whom it is clinically appropriate.

Electro-Convulsive Therapy

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to arrange for a further national survey of the use of electro-convulsive therapy before information from the Mental Health Minimum Data Set becomes fully available in 2003. [133946]

Mr. Hutton: There are no current plans to conduct a future national survey on the use of electro-convulsive therapy before information from the Mental Health Minimum Data Set becomes fully available in 2003. It is expected that more useful data and reliable information will be obtained from this source.

Prosorba Column

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to seek advice from the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, regarding the prescribing of the Prosorba column. [133846]

Mr. Denham: There are no current plans to refer the Prosorba column to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

NHS Service Agreements

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if health authorities and primary care trusts are required to publish details of the service agreements they have commissioned with NHS trust hospitals. [133998]

Mr. Denham: Health authorities and primary care trusts are not required to publish details of the service agreements they have commissioned with NHS trust hospitals. Details of individual service agreements are not collected centrally, although the overall cost of such agreements will be contained within the health authorities' annual accounts.

Dementia

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his Department's expenditure on medication treatment for dementia was in the most recent year for which figures are available; and what were *(a)* the expenditure, *(b)* the numbers treated and *(c)* the numbers awaiting treatment for each health authority area in the latest year for which figures are available. [133957]

Mr. Denham: Information on *(a)* expenditure and *(b)* number of prescriptions in England for the year 1999 is shown in the table. Information on the number of patients treated or waiting for treatment is not available.

Number of prescription items and the net ingredient cost of drugs dispensed in the community for dementia, 1999
England

Health authority in which the item was dispensed	*Prescription items (Thousand)*	*Net ingredient cost (£000)*
Hillingdon	0.2	18.3
Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster	0.1	12.1
Enfield and Haringey	0.2	19.6
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	0.1	13.2
Bedfordshire	0.2	15.7
Berkshire	0.2	16.7
Buckinghamshire	0.1	4.7
Bexley and Greenwich	0.2	17.0
Bromley	0.1	9.6
Croydon	0.2	26.8
East Kent	0.3	40.9
West Kent	0.2	23.1
Kingston and Richmond	0.3	25.1
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	0.1	8.8
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	0.2	14.6
East Surrey	0.3	37.1
West Surrey	0.7	82.1
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	0.5	44.8
West Sussex	0.8	100.2
Barking and Havering	0.7	80.8
Barnet	0.3	38.2
Brent and Harrow	0.1	18.7
Camden and Islington	0.3	30.8
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	0.1	8.4
East London and The City	0.1	12.6
North Essex	1.0	95.4
South Essex	0.4	41.4
South Lancashire	0.0	3.4
Liverpool	0.1	10.8
Manchester	0.6	41.9
Morecambe Bay	1.3	109.8
St. Helens and Knowsley	0.2	12.5
Salford and Trafford	0.2	12.7

Number of prescription items and the net ingredient cost of drugs dispensed in the community for dementia, 1999
England

Health authority in which the item was dispensed	*Prescription items (Thousand)*	*Net ingredient cost (£000)*
Sefton	0.1	5.6
Stockport	0.2	15.9
West Pennine	0.4	30.4
Northamptonshire	0.3	24.3
Oxfordshire	0.1	10.3
Suffolk	0.5	43.7
Barnsley	0.0	5.3
North Derbyshire	0.3	22.1
Southern Derbyshire	0.3	31.9
Doncaster	0.1	2.2
Leicestershire	0.7	73.2
Lincolnshire	1.4	110.1
North Nottinghamshire	0.2	16.0
Nottingham	1.7	153.1
Rotherham	0.1	5.3
Sheffield	0.4	64.5
Bury and Rochdale	0.2	12.5
North Cheshire	0.1	5.5
South Cheshire	1.5	109.4
East Lancashire	0.3	21.7
North West Lancashire	1.0	77.6
North and Mid Hampshire	0.5	66.2
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	0.2	35.4
Southampton and South West Hampshire	1.5	128.5
Somerset	0.5	53.2
South and West Devon	0.3	35.8
Wiltshire	1.0	111.6
Avon	0.2	18.0
Birmingham	0.2	18.7
Wigan and Bolton	1.3	105.7
Wirral	1.5	100.3
Bradford	0.2	14.6
County Durham and Darlington	0.1	8.1
East Riding and Hull	0.2	18.9
Leeds	1.7	109.0
Newcastle and North Tyneside	0.2	25.9
North Cumbria	1.1	94.4
South Humber	0.1	12.6
Northumberland	0.1	11.1
Sunderland	0.2	25.2
Tees	0.1	8.8
North Yorkshire	0.3	21.6
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	0.9	81.1
Dorset	0.2	18.0
North and East Devon	0.2	16.8
Gloucestershire	0.1	11.2
Coventry	0.1	5.4
Shropshire	0.1	14.1
Solihull	0.1	8.3
North Staffordshire	0.1	6.0
South Staffordshire	0.1	10.1
Warwickshire	0.1	5.7
Worcestershire	0.2	24.5
East and North Hertfordshire	0.2	25.0
West Hertfordshire	0.1	5.5
Cambridgeshire	0.3	25.7
Norfolk	0.1	12.9
England	34.6	3,214.4

Notes:

1. Prescription Cost Analysis data are based on a full analysis of all prescriptions dispensed in the community, i.e. by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors, and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered in England. Total prescriptions include not only prescriptions originating from general practices in England but also from hospital doctors and dentists provided they were dispensed in the community. Also included are prescriptions written in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man but dispensed in England. The data do not cover drugs dispensed in hospital or private prescriptions. Health authority data cover prescriptions dispensed in that health authority.

2. The net ingredient cost is the basic cost of a drug and does not take account of discounts, dispensing costs, fees or prescription charges income.

3. Drugs used in the treatment of dementia are those defined in the British National Formulary (BNF) section 4.11, "Drugs for dementia".

4. North West Anglia Health Authority ceased to exist from 1 April 1999. The existing practices and contractors were reallocated to Cambridge and Norfolk Health Authorities.

5. Health authorities where the number of prescription items dispensed was less than 50 have been removed due to confidentiality issues

Kidney Dialysis

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients, by age group, have received kidney dialysis in the last five available years; and what proportion of these are kidney patients in each age group. [133981]

Mr. Denham: The information available is derived from the United Kingdom Renal Registry and from provisional data collected in the renal survey commissioned by the Department of Health. It is estimated that 21,150 new adult patients were accepted for kidney dialysis between 1995 and 1999, although a small percentage of these patients will not have started dialysis. The age distribution of these patients at the time they were accepted for kidney dialysis is shown in the table:

Age range	*Percentage of patients*
18–24	3
25–34	6
35–44	10
45–54	14
55–64	21
65–74	29
75–84	16
over 85	1

In addition, there were 420 new patients who were under 18 years old when they were accepted for kidney dialysis between 1995 and 1999.

Organ Transplants

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on how organ donation is co-ordinated nationally and locally in the UK. [133982]

Mr. Denham: Organ donation is co-ordinated locally by transplant co-ordinators who are employed by National Health Service trusts. The matching and allocation of organs on a United Kingdom-wide basis is co-ordinated by United Kingdom Transplant, a special health authority based in Bristol.

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of how up-to-date the names and addresses on the NHS Organ Donor Register are; [133976]

(2) how frequently the NHS Organ Donor Register was accessed in 1999 by hospitals seeking donors. [133977]

Mr. Denham: The Department has asked the United Kingdom Transplant to review the most effective ways to ensure all the data on the Organ Donor Register are up to date. This includes consideration of the information provided by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and general practitioners.

Access to the National Health Service Organ Donor Register is via a 24-hour service at United Kingdom Transplant. Transplant co-ordinators mainly employed by local transplant centres may access the Register and during 1999 did so on only a handful of occasions, although this is currently not formally recorded.

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients died in each year from 1995 to 1999 whilst on the waiting list for a *(a)* heart, *(b)* heart and lung, *(c)* lung and *(d)* liver transplant. [133979]

Mr. Denham: The number of patients in England dying from any cause while registered on the active transplant waiting list, 1995–1999 is given in the table.

England

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
waiting for:					
(a) heart	64	66	63	60	56
(b) heart and lung	37	48	34	26	27
(c) lung(s)	60	53	59	68	72
(d) liver	57	55	64	74	71

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people are currently awaiting *(a)* a kidney transplant, *(b)* a heart transplant, *(c)* a heart and lung transplant, *(d)* a lung transplant, *(e)* a liver transplant and *(f)* other forms of transplant; and if he will make a statement on the shortfall between the numbers of organs available for transplant and of people needing such organs. [133980]

Mr. Denham: The current active waiting list is as follows:

England

As of 3 October 2000	*Number*
(a) kidney	3,950
(b) heart	165
(c) heart/lung	100
(d) lung	203
(e) liver	127
(f) other (solid organ)[1]	85

[1] Mainly kidney + pancreas and pancreas

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many organ transplants were carried out in the last five years for which figures are available. [133978]

Mr. Denham: The number of solid organ transplants carried out from 1995 to 1999 is given in the table.

England

	Number
1995	2,438
1996	2,253
1997	2,274
1998	1,993
1999	2,078

Hospital Waiting Lists (Norfolk)

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in Norfolk were waiting to see a consultant on *(a)* 31 March 1997, *(b)* 31 March 1998, *(c)* 31 March 1999 and *(d)* 31 March 2000. [133829]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Therapeutic Cloning

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the benefits of using *(a)* adult stem cells and *(b)* stem cells from embryos created by therapeutic cloning in treating damage to the brain, internal organs, bone and other tissues and organs. [134257]

Yvette Cooper: The Chief Medical Officer's Expert Group in its report "Stem Cell Research: Medical Progress with Responsibility" concluded that research involving the extraction and use of stem cells raised the prospect of a range of exciting new therapeutic possibilities for the repair of diseased or damaged tissues including repairing nerve cells lost in Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease, replacing lost heart muscle cells in cases of congestive heart failure, bone cells in osteoporosis, liver cells in cases of hepatitis or cirrhosis and so on.

The Expert Group concluded that embryonic stem cells have the potential to develop into a far greater range of tissues than adult derived stem cells. The Group went on to say that while the long term promise of stem cells derived from adult tissue may equal or even surpass that of embryonic stem cells it was probable that scientific advances from embryonic stem cell research would be necessary to understand how to make greater use of stem cells derived from adult tissue.

Operations (Warrington Hospital)

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* cataract, *(b)* knee joint replacement, *(c)* hip joint replacement and *(d)* hernia operations were performed at Warrington Hospital in each of the last three years. [133754]

Mr. Denham: The table shows a count of cataract, knee replacement, hip replacement and hernia operations performed in Warrington Hospital National Health Service Trust for the years 1996–97 to 1998–99.

Finished consultant episodes by selected operations
Warrington Hospital NHS Trust 1996–97 to 1998–99

	Cataract operations	*Knee replacement*	*Hip replacement*	*Hernia operations*
1996–97	1,215	108	226	271
1997–98	1,050	120	273	301
1998–99	1,198	134	287	338

Generics

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to change the reimbursement arrangements for pharmacists and dispensing doctors relating to generics. [133852]

Mr. Denham: Linked to the recent introduction of a statutory maximum price scheme for generic medicines, the government abolished Category D of Part VIII of the Drug Tariff with effect from September prescriptions and replaced it with more tightly controlled arrangements for reimbursing pharmacists fairly when due to shortage they have no alternative but to purchase a more expensive product.

Work on longer-term arrangements for the supply of generics to the community—including reimbursement arrangements for pharmacists—is still in progress. We intend to discuss our proposals with interested parties before reaching final decisions on the way forward.

Fluoride

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will set out WHO requirements in respect of *(a)* monitoring of fluoride levels, and *(b)* children in receipt of fluoridated milk. [R] [134146]

Yvette Cooper: Reports from the World Health Organisation (WHO) contain valuable information, which can helpfully inform government policy but, unless they are incorporated into United Kingdom law, their status is advisory rather than mandatory. Technical guidance on methods of measurement of fluoride, and their interpretation, and on fluoridation of mild, is included in recent WHO publications such as Technical Report 846 "Fluorides and oral health" (1994) and "Monitoring of renal fluoride excretion in community preventive programmes on oral health" (1999).

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Food Distribution Industry

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Competition Commission's report on the food distribution industry will be published. [130928]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

The Competition Commission report on the supply of groceries from supermarkets was published on 10 October.

Dogs

Mr. Amess: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received about German plans to ban the breeding and importing of certain breeds of dogs. [133575]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply.

I have received many letters on this subject from dog breeders and owners in this country, and from their Members of Parliament and interested organisations. A particular concern has been a proposal by the German authorities for European Union (EU) legislation on dangerous dogs.

The United Kingdom Government cannot interfere in the internal law-making processes of other countries, but we are opposed to the idea of EU legislation on dangerous dogs. We certainly could not agree to any EU measures which would require us to bring in laws on this matter more stringent than those we have at present, which we consider adequate for present and future control needs in this country.

Oilseed Rape

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many fields of oilseed rape have been sown using seed contaminated by GM material in the Chesham and Amersham parliamentary constituency; and if he will make a statement. [125895]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 June 2000]:* The information requested is not held by MAFF. Advanta Seeds UK Ltd. established a scheme to contact, register and compensate all the affected farmers for crop destruction. The Central Science Laboratory is auditing that scheme on behalf of the Government to check that the crops have not been marketed.

Mink

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what investigations his Department has conducted into the release of mink from a fur farm at Bourne Hill in Lancashire in July 1999, with particular reference to *(a)* the number of mink released, *(b)* damage done to the perimeter fencing and *(c)* responsibility for the release; and if he will make a statement. [131731]

Mr. Morley: The Ministry was notified by the police on 7 August 1999 that mink had been released from the fur farm. The Farming and Rural Conservation Agency, an Executive agency of the Ministry, immediately visited the site to investigate the incident. They found that the perimeter fence had been breached in two places by being cut. It was estimated that between 50 and 100 mink escaped outside the farm and were unaccounted for.

I am not aware of anyone claiming responsibility for the break-in. This is a matter for the police to pursue.

Ducks

Mrs. Gordon: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what the main diseases are which affect intensively reared ducks in the UK; and what percentage of ducks is affected by each disease; [132688]

(2) what the pre-slaughter mortality rate is of ducks *(a)* reared for the meat and *(b)* kept for breeding purposes in the UK; [132689]

(3) how many ducks on UK farms have access to water in which they can swim; [132690]

(4) how many ducks on UK farms have access to facilities which enable them to immerse their heads in water; [132691]

(5) what percentage of ducks swan-neck on entering the waterbath stunner in UK slaughterhouses; [132694]

(6) when the UK will adopt the Council of Europe's June 1999 recommendation made by the Standing Committee of the European Convention for the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes. [132695]

Mr. Morley: I wrote to my hon. Friend on 24 August 2000. Copies of my letter were placed in the Library of the House.

Farmers (Totnes)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make available to the hon. Member for Totnes the list held by his Department's Strategy and Policy section of farmers working in the Totnes constituency, used by his Department for mail-shots; and if he will answer the letter from the hon. Member for Totnes of 4 July on this subject. [132443]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 July 2000]:* I replied to the hon. Member on 31 August explaining that the Agricultural Statistics Act 1972, under which the provisions of which the register of agricultural holdings is maintained, prevents disclosure of any information without the written permission of the supplier of the information, except in particular circumstances. The requirements of the Data Protection Act 1988 further precludes release of lists of names and addresses.

Press Releases

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many press releases have been issued so far this year; and what the total cost of the production and issuing of press releases was in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000 to date. [132779]

Mr. Morley: The total number of press releases issued by MAFF since 1 January this year is 350. They are made available to all press and media bodies through the Central Office of Information (COI) managed News Distribution Service and the Internet at an average cost of £92 per press release. Cost data are not available for 1997 and 1998, but this figure represents a significant saving against an average of £244 per press release in 1999 when printed copies were also distributed via the Royal Mail postal service.

Press Officers

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many press officers were employed in his Department in *(a)* May 1997, *(b)* January 1998, *(c)* January 1999 and *(d)* January 2000; and what the total expenditure on press officers by his Department was in each of the years concerned. [132764]

Mr. Morley: The numbers are as follows:

	Number
May 1997	9
January 1998	8
January 1999	9
January 2000	9

Pay and running costs for the equivalent financial years are as follows:

	£
1997–98	460,000
1998–99	556,000
1999–2000	605,000

Farm Profitability

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list his Department's figures for the profitability of *(a)* sugar beet production, *(b)* other arable production and *(c)* total farm enterprises for each of the years from 1989 to 1999. [132523]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 September 2000]:* Estimates for the profitability of sugar beet and other arable production derived from information collected for farms in the University of Cambridge's province of the Farm Business Survey are shown in the table. Comparable data for 1999 are not yet available.

Gross margins per hectare in real terms[1] for the Eastern counties of England (£ per hectare)

Harvest year	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Sugar Beet	1,098	1,282	1,224	1,547	1,271	1,188	1,228	1,115	973	951
Winter Wheat	707	739	737	738	779	820	969	792	629	625
Winter Barley	667	580	595	647	672	682	866	681	583	524
Spring Barley	525	472	609	657	613	634	820	534	548	566
Oilseed Rape	736	743	572	596	681	629	781	896	766	576
Beans	556	434	521	778	666	645	635	596	638	481
Peas	603	644	656	712	688	638	745	674	613	439
Potatoes	3,522	2,214	2,291	1,183	2,736	5,876	4,600	1,091	2,203	5,352
All enterprises[2]	867	604	655	740	777	880	1,015	944	815	824

[1] Deflated by a 1998 input price index

[2] Estimates for all enterprises should not be compared to those for the individual enterprises as they will also reflect profitability of other enterprises on other farms (e. g. livestock).

Source:

Report on Farming in the Eastern Counties of England (University of Cambridge)

Northallerton Regional Centre

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if his Department's regional centre at Northallerton will continue to take queries in person from local farmers. [133108]

Ms Quin: We will maintain arrangements for face-to-face local contacts with farmers in all regions in the lead up to the establishment of the CAP Payments Agency (CAPPA).

The substantial investment which we propose to make in modernising CAP administration over the next Spending Review period will transform the way in which we deal with CAP payments. Farmers who submit their claims electronically will benefit from faster payment and the 'intelligent' forms will be significantly easier to complete. We are consulting widely on the best ways of ensuring a smooth transition to the new arrangements and helping our customers to reap the benefits with electronic service delivery offers. We will review the arrangements

for face-to-face contact with farmers on their CAP subsidy claims when the new IT systems for CAPPA are fully operational and everyone has easy local access to the internet.

In parallel with the establishment of CAPPA, we are restructuring other aspects of our operational activity in the regions to strengthen MAFF's ability to deliver an effective and responsive local service to farmers on the implementation of the England Rural Development Plan.

Fishing (Quota Hopping)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many Spanish skippers of quota-hopper fishing vessels have been paid compensation for being unable to fish after the passage of the Merchant Shipping Act 1988; how long they were stopped from fishing; and what was the average compensation per skipper; [132819]

(2) how many British ticket holders working on Spanish quota-hopper vessels under the terms of the Aliens (Amendment) Act 1919 received compensation for being prevented from fishing by the Merchant Shipping Act 1988. [132820]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 27 July 2000]:* Payments have been made only to the owners of vessels de-registered under the provisions of the Merchant Shipping Act 1988.

Merchant Navy Day

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure that the Red Ensign is flown from departmental buildings on Merchant Navy Day, 3 September. [132954]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 27 July 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), on 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 895W.

Electronic Communications Act 2000

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what orders he *(a)* has made and *(b)* intends to make using section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000; and if he will make a statement. [133374]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 905W.

Organic Farming

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the total spending by his Department in support of organic farming will be in 2000–01, 2001–02 and 2002–03. [133479]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* In respect of organic conversion aid to farmers, we have set aside £12 million for 2000–01, £18 million for 2001–02 and £20 million for 2002–03. The budget for research and development in the organic sector is £2.1 million for each of the three years.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* successful prosecutions there were under the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968 in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [131983]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* My officials are aware of one successful prosecution under this Act in 1992, three successful prosecutions in 1993, and one successful prosecution in 1998. Other authorities may also have been responsible for prosecutions.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* successful prosecutions there were under the Welfare of Livestock Regulations 1994 in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [131844]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* As far as my Department is concerned, there was one successful prosecution in 1995, five successful prosecutions in 1996 and three in 1997. Other authorities may also have conducted prosecutions in this area.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* successful prosecutions there were under the (i) Protection of Animals (Anaesthetics) Acts 1954 and 1964, (ii) Welfare of Livestock (Prohibited Operations) Regulations 1982, (iii) Docking and Nicking of Horses Act 1949 and (iv) Removal of Antlers in Velvet (Anaesthetics) Order 1988 in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [131985]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* My officials are aware of two successful prosecutions and one unsuccessful one under the Protection of Animals (Anaesthetics) Acts in 1995, and one successful prosecution in 1999. They are not aware of any prosecutions under the other listed legislation during the relevant period. Other authorities may also have been responsible for prosecutions.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* successful prosecutions there have been under the (i) Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 and (ii) Slaughterhouses Act 1974 in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [131846]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* My officials are aware of one successful prosecution under the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 in 1996, three successful prosecutions in 1997, seven successful prosecutions in 1998 and four in 1999. They are not aware of any prosecutions under the Slaughterhouses Act 1974 during the relevant period. Other authorities may also have been responsible for prosecutions.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* successful prosecutions there were under the (i) Markets, Sales and Lairs Orders 1925, 1926, 1927 and 1970, (ii) Welfare of Animals at Markets Order 1990 and (iii) Welfare of Horses at Markets (and other places of sale) Order 1990 for each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [131785]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* My officials are aware of one successful prosecution under the Welfare of Animals at Markets Order 1990 in 1997, and no prosecutions under the other Orders. Other authorities may also have been responsible for prosecutions.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* successful prosecutions there were under the (i) Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 and (ii) Animal Health Act 1981 in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [131843]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* My officials are aware of one successful prosecution under the Welfare of Animals (Transport) 1997, in 1999. This Order is primarily for local authorities to enforce. The Ministry conducted two successful prosecutions in 1990, one successful prosecution in 1993 and four successful prosecutions in 1998 under the Animal Health Act 1981. Other authorities may also have been responsible for prosecutions under this Act.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* successful prosecutions there were under the *(a)* Destructive Imported Animals Act 1932 and *(b)* Mink (Keeping) Order 1997 in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [131981]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* My officials are not aware of any prosecutions under the listed legislation during this period.

Farm Subsidies

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what subsidy payments have been made for growing flax and hemp in each of the past five years; and what percentage of the crops were not harvested or marketed. [133231]

Ms Quin: *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* The following table provides details of area harvested and rate of aid per hectare for the five crop years 1995–96 to 1999–2000:

	Area Harvested (Hectares)		*Rate of Aid (£ per Hectare)*	
Crop Year	*Flax*	*Hemp*	*Flax*	*Hemp*
1995–96	17,151	1,128	[1]646.87 [1]561.47	653.84
1996–97	20,650	1,751	591.16 513.13	645.99
1997–98	18,862	2,333	569.83 494.61	575.97
1998–99	16,770	2,697	535.46 464.78	500.64
1999–2000	15,052	1,489	567.67 497.74	487.92

[1] The higher and lower figures show the aid rates applicable to deseeded and non-deseeded flax crops

Porpoises

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how many porpoises have *(a)* been caught and *(b)* perished as a result of fishing activities in UK waters in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; [133706]

(2) what policies his Department is pursuing to reduce the number of porpoises killed as a result of fishing. [133731]

Mr. Morley: Information on the full extent of porpoise casualties caused by fishing is not available.

My Department is funding the Sea Mammal Research Unit to undertake a three year project following on from earlier EU-funded work, including research at sea on the use of pingers to deter porpoises from nets. The new project which began in July will consider in detail why harbour porpoises become entangled in gill nets and seek to identify modifications to fishing gear which will reduce bycatches. If this work is successful I will encourage the UK industry to make the necessary adaptations and will also seek action at the EU level. In this regard, I welcomed the statement by Franz Fischler, the European Fisheries Commissioner, at the June Fisheries Council on the need to address the problem of cetacean bycatch.

With the support of this Department, my colleague and hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), launched the UK's Harbour Porpoise Conservation Strategy at the 3rd Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans of the Baltic and North Seas (ASCOBANS) Meeting of Parties held in Bristol between 26 and 28 July. This strategy sets out how the species is to be protected from pollution, seismic and other disturbances, as well as incidental mortality as a result of fishing activity.

Cod

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what policies his Department is pursuing to ensure abundant supplies of cod in *(a)* the short term and *(b)* the long term; [133704]

(2) if he will make a statement on the state of cod fish stocks: [133702]

(3) what assessment he has made of the statement by the World Wildlife Fund on the state of cod stocks. [133703]

Mr. Morley: The Government are committed to managing cod stocks on the basis of the precautionary approach in order to keep them away from levels at which there is a serious risk of collapse and to help rebuild them for the future. Cod stocks generally are in poor shape, with unusually low recruitment of young fish, which may be due in part to climatic factors. This is reflected in the reduced TACs agreed for 2000 and lower landings by fishermen this year compared with 1999.

We have already demonstrated our willingness to support strong short term measures when needed. The UK took the lead in securing the Irish Sea cod recovery programme developed in close consultation with the industry and adopted in the EU earlier this year. This should help rebuild the depleted cod stock in the Irish Sea. It includes closing spawning areas in the Irish Sea from mid-February to the end of April to protect spawning cod as well as new technical conservation measures to improve protection for young cod.

Advice on cod stocks will be provided by the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) in the autumn. We will then consider, in the light of ICES' assessment and recommendations, what management action is needed for 2001.

Telephone Steering Systems

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many individual lines are operated as part of the touch tone steering system installed at his Department's sites. [134052]

Mr. Morley: The number of lines available to members of the public calling in to MAFF's touch tone steering systems is variable. MAFF adjusts according to business need the number of lines which will at a given time connect callers to MAFF staff, the number of callers who will be put into a queue and the number of callers who may listen to recorded information.

These may be altered on a daily basis.

Expenditure

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how the Forestry Commission departmental expenditure limit set out in the 2000 Spending Review will be divided between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. [134013]

Mr. Nick Brown: The figures given in the Spending Review 2000 for the Forestry Commission cover its net expenditure for GB core functions and activities in England. Although the Commission's activities in Wales were not covered by the Review, a £5.5 million baseline for Wales is also included for each year because responsibility for the Commission's expenditure in Wales has not yet transferred to the National Assembly. Responsibility for the Commission's expenditure in Scotland has already been transferred to the Scottish Parliament. The Commission has no remit in Northern Ireland; forestry matters there are administered by the Forest Service of the Northern Ireland Assembly's Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Annual Report (Error)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he was informed of the drafting errors on page 15 of the Government's Annual Report; and what steps he is taking to publicise the error. [134030]

Mr. Nick Brown: The hon. Member is assured that the drafting errors on page 15 of the Government's Annual Report (1999–2000) had already been rectified. The final sentence on page 15 should read

> Thanks to the latest EU "Agenda 2000" budget reforms negotiated this year, the annual [shopping] bill for a family of four will fall on average by £65.

The publishers were asked to insert an addendum slip into copies of the Report, and the text lodged on the website (www. annualreport.gov.uk) has been corrected.

Ragwort

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his oral statement of 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1090, on what basis he confines his Department's responsibility for the control of ragwort to seeding ragwort which is growing only on agricultural land as defined by the Agriculture Act 1947. [R] [133999]

Mr. Morley: MAFF deals with all complaints under the Weeds Act on their own merits, but gives priority to complaints where farmland or farmed animals are at risk. Such cases will normally be in respect of "agricultural land".

Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the research projects being *(a)* carried out and *(b)* sponsored by his Department into rabbit haemorrhagic disease, and stating the nature of each project. [128309]

Mr. Nick Brown *[pursuant to his reply, 12 July 2000, c. 587W]:* A further search has revealed that MAFF is currently a contributor to one project on viral haemorrhagic disease of rabbits:

> The impact of rabbit viral haemorrhagic disease on wild rabbit populations.

The project is jointly sponsored with the University of Stirling, the Institute for Virology and Environmental Microbiology, The British Association for Shooting and Conservation Ltd., The Game Conservancy Trust, The National Trust, English Nature and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

I regret that this information was inadvertently omitted from my earlier reply.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 24 October 2000

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Banana Trade Dispute

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is his policy on the provision of temporary aid to UK businesses affected by the EU-USA banana trade dispute; and if he will make a statement. [134210]

Mr. Byers: The way to alleviate this burden from all the companies facing possible US sanctions is to find a solution to the banana dispute that is satisfactory to all parties. It is precisely this that the Government have been working hard to achieve since the US first imposed retaliation last year.

While I fully sympathise with the plight of these companies, any suggestion of offering some form of direct compensation for lost business as a result of US actions poses considerable legal difficulties, under the terms of membership of the WTO.

Patent Office

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what decisions he has reached on the future of the Patent Office in the light of the review announced by the Minister for Competitiveness on 27 April. [134447]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The first stage of the Review of the Patent Office has now been completed. I am pleased to say that the Review found that the Office is now extremely customer focused and responsive. The quality of the Office's patent granting and other registration functions is well regarded and compares favourably with that of other intellectual property offices. The Patent Office has met or exceeded most of its performance objectives and targets. It has contributed to the achievement of wider Government objectives. Its standards of customer service are very high. It has achieved a Charter Mark three times, and IiP accreditation.

The Patent Office will continue as an Executive Agency of the DTI. There are significant concerns about privatising or contracting out in full what are largely judicial functions, where commercial drivers could lead to unhelpful pressures. The review found that Agency status was widely thought to have worked well.

We want the UK to play a key role in driving forward international policy on intellectual property—not just patents and trade marks but copyright too, where the Internet and digital uses are posing new challenges. We need to ensure that copyright can be protected and enforced on an international basis, while balancing both user and owner interests. We intend to strengthen the policy units, bringing in a range of expertise and widening the consultation mechanisms, so as to work in partnership with the different interests.

Getting a patent or trade mark is only part of the story for business. They also have to find a market for their invention and need to know how to defend their intellectual property rights. The Patent Office will in future be doing more to help them—linking up with the Small Business Service and the support for innovation the DTI provides. For example, we will be exploring what more needs to be done—using the web—to match inventors with business partners. The Patent Office will also be investigating how it might develop alternative dispute resolution with the interests of small business and private applicants in mind.

Trade is becoming increasingly international and patents need to reflect this. The UK can play a key role in developing the international systems to make them cheap, speedy and accessible. We want to see the expertise of national offices used to achieve this. We have a very well respected team of specialist examiners—we want to see them (and other national offices) being used to speed up and improve the international routes for granting patents. The UK route for patents could then become complementary to the international routes. The review recommended that UK fees should be adjusted to discourage duplication of work and to cover costs. We intend to consider, and consult as necessary, on the scope for changing the fee structure to achieve these objectives.

Our trade mark registration function is highly regarded and it is still needed alongside the EC trade mark and the international trade mark system. The review concluded that there was a good case for bringing greater consistency between the UK and EC systems by ceasing to refuse applications on the grounds of conflicting marks, but possibly notifying the applicant and trade mark owner of conflicts. We intend to consult on the options.

On designs, an EC regime is in prospect and we will consult on whether a UK system is still needed once that is in place.

We intend to ensure that the governance of the Patent Office reflects the need to provide a balance between producer interests, the innovation agenda and the interests of end-consumers, by including a range of external members on the Steering Board, which would discuss policy at a strategic level. We will also be considering whether a new name would better reflect the Office's role and aims. The Office will be working closely with Companies House and Nominet to ensure that, in so far as it would be helpful for companies, a unified application should be possible.

IT is a key strategic enabler for the Office. Advice from consultants showed that the current management, systems and equipment were appropriate and effective for business needs and offered value for money. They generally endorsed the Office's approach to new initiatives, while making some proposals which the Office will be taking forward. The Patent Office has already developed a highly rated website and is on track to have all services available electronically by the Government target of 2005.

The report of Stage 1 of the Review of the Patent Office has been placed in the Library of the House.

Stage 2 of the review has now started and is considering whether any changes should be made to the way in which the Patent Office operates, including its aims and objectives, targets and financial controls.

ACAS Report

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to receive the Annual report for the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service. [134445]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The ACAS report for 1999–2000 is being laid before both Houses of Parliament today. Copies are available from the Vote Office.

Supermarkets Inquiry

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ask the Director General of Fair Trading to inquire into the proposed new distribution arrangement between W H Smith Retail and Tesco; and if he will assess what percentage of the wholesale market in the UK is held by each and the consequences of this for competition. [133818]

Dr. Howells: The Director General of Fair Trading is already aware of proposals to introduce new arrangements for the distribution of magazines and is monitoring the situation. It would be for the Director General to assess what impact these arrangements would have on competition.

Industrial Compensation

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many MAP testing centres there are in the UK; where they are; on what dates they opened; how many examinations were carried out at each centre; and how many persons are waiting to be examined at each centre. [133985]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 8 October 2000 Healthcall Services Ltd., the company contracted to carry out the full Medical Assessment Process, has 26 centres operational (Mountain Ash being counted as a double centre because it has two sets of equipment). Healthcall will shortly be opening two further centres in South Wales, a centre in Wrexham, a centre in Stirling and a second set of equipment is to be installed in Barnsley, bringing the total to 30.

Location	*Date opened*	*Number of assessments*	*Future booked appointments*
1. Ayr	End of April	163	25
2. Barnsley	End of March	78	141
3. Bristol	End of May	[1] —	
4. Cannock	End of April	25	59
5. Chesterfield	End of February	79	93
6. Coventry	End of January	47	36
7. Deal	End of May	43	5
8. Durham	End of March	87	241
9. Edinburgh	End of March	166	55
10. Glasgow	End of March	235	58
11. Huddersfield	End of February	[2] —	11
12. Leeds	End of May	47	25
13. Lochore	End of January	207	102
14. Manchester	End of February	30	19
15. Mansfield	End of February	236	168
16. Mexborough	End of February	103	111
17. Mountain Ash	End of January	414	452
18. Newcastle	End of January	83	183
19. Newport	End of January	473	199
20. Nottingham	End of January	132	109
21. Pontefract	End of February	169	220
22. Sheffield	End of January	147	62
23. Stoke	End of April	37	54
24. Swansea	End of January	364	313
25. Wigan	End of June	10	28
Deceased		1,150	209
Domiciliary		266	29
Total		4,791	3,021

[1] Due to lack of claims the equipment was moved to Mountain Ash, when numbers increase new equipment is available to re-equip the centre at short notice

[2] Centre is equipped and doctors are available. Awaiting claims documentation before appointments could start

[3] Two sets of equipment

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims in respect of chronic bronchitis and emphysema have been settled under the MAP process; what the names are of the firms dealing with these claims and the numbers of claims settled in each case; and what the average value is of these claims. [133987]

Mrs. Liddell: The Department is not yet able to make full and final offers in most cases as some elements of compensation (for example pension loss) have still to be agreed with the miners' solicitors. However, interim payments are made on all other heads of damages. So far we have processed over 1,300 claims post Medical Assessment Process (MAP). Half of these resulted in interim offers of compensation. The average value of accepted offer is just under £3,500.

Under the handling agreement signed by the DTI and the claimants' solicitors the breakdown of post MAP interim offers is:

Solicitors Name	*Offers Made*	*Offers Accepted*
Ashton Morton Slack Solicitors	2	1
Attey Dibb and Clegg	2	2
Barnetts	1	1
Browell Smith and Co.	2	0
Davis Blank Furniss	1	1
Donald Race and Newton	1	1
Foy and Co.	1	0
Furley Page Fielding and Barton	2	0
Graysons Solicitors	8	6
Hopkins	17	13
Hugh James Ford Simey	192	180
Keeble Hawson Moorhouse	14	12
Latham and Co.	1	0
Malcolm C. Foy and Co.	1	0
Meloy, Whittle Robinson	1	1
Moss Solicitors	5	2
Nelsons	1	0
Raleys Solicitors	3	3
T. S. Edwards and Son Solicitors	15	11
Thomas and Co. Solicitors	4	2
Thompson and Co.	1	1
Thompsons Solicitors	80	61
Towells Solicitors	1	0
Union of Democratic Mineworkers	320	280
Total	676	578

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many offers of compensation for chronic bronchitis and emphysema have been made under the expedited process; how many offers have been accepted; what the names are of the solicitors or organisations dealing with these claims; and what the average value is of these claims. [133986]

Mrs. Liddell: The Department announced in September that it would upgrade the levels of expedited offers (going up from previous maxim of £4,750 to £14,500 depending on loss of lung function). 5,500 revised offers totalling £21.4 million went out last week. This will considerably raise the average offer to date.

Under the Handling Agreement signed by the DTI and the claimants' solicitors the breakdown of expedited offers is:

Solicitors name	*Offers made*	*Offers accepted*
Abenson and Co.	1	0
Accident and Injury Claims Centre	5	1
Adam F. Greenhalgh and Co. Solicitors	1	1
Ashcroft and Co. Solicitors	1	1
Ashton Morton Slack Solicitors	4	4
Attey Dibb and Clegg	43	10
Barnetts	2	1
Beecham Peacock	2	2
Bell Wright and Dallman	1	0
Ben Hoare Bell and Co. Solicitors	7	0
Beresfords (incorporating R. A. Swift)	34	11
Berryman Shacklocks Solicitors	2	2
Bleasdale and Co.	1	0
Bridge Sanderson Munro	1	0
Browell Smith and Co.	835	43
Burton Green Williamson	1	1
Bury Walkers Solicitors	2	0
Carr and Co. Solicitors	2	0
Chapman and Chubb	1	0
Coley and Tilley	1	0
Corries Solicitors	6	0
Davis Blank Furniss	1	0
Dean Thomas and Co. Solicitors	1	0
Donald Race and Newton	1	0
Douglas Jones Mercer Solicitors	4	0
Elliot Mather	6	4
Emsleys Solicitors	12	1
Endlar Quigley	1	0
Endlars Solicitors	7	3
Farleys	7	4
Foy and Co. Solicitors	7	2
Frank Allen Pennington Solicitors	11	3
Furley Page Fielding and Barton	110	18
Gabb and Co.	20	8
George Mills Solicitors	6	3
Gorman Hamilton Solicitors	60	16
Gorvin Smith Fort	8	6
Graysons	659	406
Gwilym Jones and Davies with Bryant and Co.	1	0
Hamers Solicitors	8	0
Hartley and Worstenholme Solicitors	1	0
Hickmotts Solicitors	15	6
Higgins and Co. Solicitors	1	1
Holyoak and Co. Solicitors	1	0
Hopkins	151	55
Hugh James Ford Simey	1,139	285
Irwin Mitchell Solicitors	324	127
Ison Harrison	2	1
J. Keith Park and Co. Solicitors	22	14
Jackson Heath Solicitors	2	0
John E. Millar and Company Solicitors	3	2
John Y. Robertson	6	1
Jordans	2	0
Keeble Hawson Moorhouse	137	41
Kidd and Spoor Harper Solicitors	51	30
Kirk Jackson	1	1
Latham and Co. Solicitors	50	13
Lees and Partners	1	0
Leo Abse and Cohen	2	0
Mace and Jones	1	0
Malcolm C. Foy and Co. Solicitors	4	1
Mark Gilbert Morse	16	1
Marrons Solicitors	75	3
Mathie Lennox	1	0
Maurice Smith and Co. Solicitors	1	0
McArdles Solicitors	1	0
Meloy, Whittle Robinson Solicitors	15	0
Mills Kemp and Brown Solicitors	1	0
Mincoffs	6	1
Morgan Cole	32	4
Morison Bishop	18	10
Mortons Solicitors	28	7
Moss Solicitors	85	18
Moxon and Barker Solicitors	2	0
Needham Solicitors	1	1
Nelson and Co. Solicitors	10	5
O. H. Parsons and Partners Solicitors	243	80
Osborne Jones and Co. Solicitors	1	0
Oxley and Coward Solicitors	48	10
Park Hutchison Solicitors and Notaries	61	24
Peace and Co. Solicitors	1	0
Philip Morris Solicitors	1	0
Pickerings Solicitors	1	1
Plancey and Co.	14	11
R. L. Edwards and Partners Solicitors	1	0
Raleys Solicitors	1,166	347
Randalls	2	1
Randell Saunders Phillips and Lloyd	68	29
Richard J. Knaggs	8	3
Richmond Anderson Goudi	1	1
Richmonds	5	4
Robinson King Solicitors	9	1
Ross and Co.	11	10
Ross Harper Solicitors	1	1
Russell Jones and Walker	4	1
Saffmans Solicitors	27	14
Sedgwick Phelan and Partners	5	4
Shaw and Co.	98	7
Silverbeck Rymer Solicitors	19	7
Simpson Millar Solicitors	12	6
Southern Stewart and Walker	5	2
Stanton Croft Solicitors	47	38
Stephensons	1	0
Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council	1	0
Stuart Bell and Associates	4	0
T. H. M. Tinsdills	1	0
T. H. Murray	1	0
T. S. Edwards and Son Solicitors	35	2
Taylor Bracewell Solicitors	3	1
The Beaumont Partnership	3	1
The Paul Rooney Partnership	1	0
The Smith Partnership	4	4
Thomas and Co. Solicitors	82	29
Thompson and Co. Solicitors	79	11
Thompson and Robinson Solicitors	2	1
Thompsons Solicitors	2,439	999
Tilly Bailey and Irvine Solicitors	3	1
Towells Solicitors	337	135
Treanors Solicitors	3	0
Twigg Farnell	2	1
Union of Democratic Mineworkers	362	90
W. Brook and Co. Solicitors	3	1
Wake Smith	15	2
Walker Cooke	1	1
Watson Burton Solicitors	405	193
Widdows Mason	1	0
Woollcombe Beer Watts	1	0
Total	9,739	3,253

The average expedited payment made is just over £2,400.

Telecommunications Council

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the outcome of the Telecommunications Council meeting held in Luxembourg on 3 October. [134446]

Ms Hewitt: There was an orientation debate on the proposed Local Loop Unbundling Regulation. During the debate all member states stressed their commitment to the Regulation and a rapid timescale for its adoption. I strongly welcomed the Regulation as an enormously important issue for the development of e-commerce across the European Union, and confirmed the UK fully supported and would be fully compliant with it. The Presidency hopes that the Regulation will be adopted at the very latest at the next Telecommunications Council in December.

The Council adopted a Resolution calling for a more co-ordinated EU approach within ICANN (the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers). Welcoming this, the Commission now intends to establish a network of European expertise on internet naming and addressing issues.

The Commission gave a progress report on the creation of an .eu top level domain name, and it is expected that a Commission Proposal will follow in October. The Council also took note of a Presidency progress report on the programme to improve the exploitation of public sector information, facilitate access to venture capital and boost multilingual content on the internet. The Presidency hopes a Council Decision will be adopted in December. There was also a Presidency progress report on the state of discussions on the new measures under the 1999 Communications Review.

The Council also discussed the Commission's postal services proposal, the main provision of which is to reduce the area reserved for incumbent national postal operators (the 'reserved area') from deliveries weighing less than 350 grams to those under 50 grams. During discussions, member states were divided on whether the proposal offered an acceptable pace of liberalisation, with several member states calling for a target date for full liberalisation. The Presidency hope for agreement at the next Telecommunications Council in December.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Sanctions

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list all the changes to sanctions regimes implemented by the United Kingdom since 28 July. [134499]

Mr. Hain: There have been changes to the following sanctions regimes.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Following the election of Vojislav Kostunica as President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), European Union Foreign Ministers agreed at the General Affairs Council on 9 October to revise EU sanctions against the FRY.

The EU oil embargo and flight ban were lifted with effect from 9 October. Legislation implementing these measures in the Overseas Territories by means of a licensing requirement is being repealed.

EU financial sanctions and the visa ban will be revised. Restrictive measures against Milosevic and his associates will be maintained.

The EU arms embargo and embargo on the supply to the FRY of equipment which might be used for internal repression or terrorism are unaffected. The UN arms embargo against the FRY and prohibition on the arming and training for terrorist activities there remain in force.

Ethiopia and Eritrea

UN Security Council resolution 1298 (2000), which was adopted on 17 May, imposed an arms embargo and a ban on the provision of related technical assistance and training in relation to Ethiopia and Eritrea. Since then, two further Security Council resolutions have been adopted which set out exemptions for demining and peacekeeping purposes.

UNSCR 1312 (2000) was adopted on 1 August and exempts the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) from the prohibitions imposed by UNSCR 1298. UNSCR 1320 (2000) was adopted on 15 September and allows equipment and other material, including technical assistance and training to be provided for demining within Ethiopia and Eritrea under the auspices of UNMAS. It also allows the sale and supply of arms and related material for the sole use of the United Nations in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Sierra Leone

UNSCR 1306 (2000), which was adopted on 5 July, imposed a ban on the import of all rough diamonds from Sierra Leone.

The resolution provided for an exemption from the ban for diamonds controlled by the Government of Sierra Leone through a Certificate of Origin regime when the UN Sanctions Committee on Sierra Leone had reported to the Security Council that an effective regime was fully in operation.

The Committee Chairman reported to the President of the Security Council on 6 October that the Committee had no objection to the procedures to be implemented by the Government of Sierra Leone. Therefore, diamonds controlled through the Government's Certificate of Origin regime are now exempt from the prohibition on the import of all rough diamonds from Sierra Leone imposed by UNSCR 1306.

TREASURY

Pre-Budget Report

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to deliver his Pre-Budget report to the House. [134502]

Mr. Gordon Brown: On Wednesday 8 November.

Duty Free

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will be reviewing the duty-free successor regime for intra-EU voyages; and if he will make a statement. [134503]

Dawn Primarolo: Intra-EU sales of duty-free alcohol and tobacco, for passengers to take away, were abolished from 1 July 1999. I said at that time that a post-implementation review of the successor regime would take place. I have now approved the Terms of Reference,

copies of which are available in the Library of the House. I expect to publish the findings of the review early in the New Year.

The review will concentrate on how well the successor regime is working and whether there are any further technical changes which can be made to improve its operation. Customs will be asking those businesses concerned in the intra-EU sales of excise goods what changes they would like to see. The review will also assess the effect of the abolition of intra-EU duty free sales on the Exchequer receipts of excise duty and VAT.

Late Payments

Mr. Efford: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will ensure that small companies automatically receive interest from public bodies on late payments made after 30 days of being invoiced; [134107]

(2) what recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on compensation for payment by public bodies after 30 days of invoices from small businesses; [134110]

(3) what steps he has taken to ensure that public bodies settle invoices within a 30 day period. [134109]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the three answers my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce gave to him on 23 October 2000, *Official Report,* columns 9–10W.

Mr. Efford: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will seek to amend the Late Payments of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998 to ensure that small companies automatically receive interest from public bodies on late payments made after 30 days of being invoiced. [134108]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Under the Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998, small businesses have an automatic right to claim interest from public bodies on debts incurred under contracts agreed after 1 November 1998.

DEFENCE

Animals (Research)

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the use of animals in defence research. [134449]

Dr. Moonie: The independent Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, chaired by Dr. Jeremy Lucke, has published its fourth annual report. The Committee was set up in 1996 specifically to keep under review the care and welfare arrangements of animals used in defence research. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library of the House.

The use of animals in defence research is concerned with providing the armed forces with safe and effective protection against hazards encountered while conducting their duties, and is kept to the absolute minimum.

The Committee's Report highlights the work being done by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency to ensure the welfare of all animals used for defence research purposes. The report provides assurances that all animals used in defence research programmes in the UK are regulated under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. The report also concludes that there is an effective ethical review process for the application of new licences which examines, among other issues, whether the use of animals can be avoided altogether in any new research procedures.

The Ministry of Defence continues to seek to find alternatives to the use of animals wherever possible. There is still much to be done in developing technologies that allow the use of animals in experiments to be further reduced. We welcome continuing scrutiny by the Animal Welfare Advisory Committee and aim to minimise the use of animals as far as possible, against the continuing requirement to research effective measures to counter the hazards faced by the armed forces in the conduct of their duties.

Submarine Fleet

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the operational availability of the submarine fleet. [134444]

Mr. Spellar: A flaw has been found in pipework that forms part of the cooling system in some Trafalgar and Swiftsure class hunter-killer submarines. Initial indications are that this may have arisen from the original construction of the component. The repair of this flaw, if needed, is straightforward but, because of the stringent safety procedures that we employ for any work involving repairs to our nuclear submarines, the repair process will take some months. As responsible nuclear operators, we take even the slightest flaw to our submarines very seriously. It is for this reason that our deployed hunter-killer submarines are being brought alongside to be inspected. Until all inspections have been completed it is not possible to determine fully the requirement for repair work and operational implications but they will be significant. The submarines remain safe, and at no time has there been any risk to their crew or the general public. Vanguard Class Trident submarines, which are of a very different design, are not affected.

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about appointments to the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. [134448]

Mr. Hoon: I am pleased to announce that I have appointed Lord Patel as a new and additional member to the Armed Forces Pay Review Body and re-appointed Vice-Admiral Sir Toby Frere for a second three-year term. These appointments have been conducted in accordance with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments' guidance on appointments to public bodies.

Weapon Systems

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what plans he has to procure a suitable weapon system for the UK Rapid Reaction Force to replace the Trigat-Medium Range Anti-Tank Weapon Programme; what it will cost; and if he will make a statement; [134134]

(2) how much his Department has spent on the Trigat-Medium Range Anti-Tank Guided Weapon Programme; over what time; and if he will make a statement. [134136]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 24 October 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about Medium Range (MR) TRIGAT. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The Defence Procurement Agency released an Invitation to Tender on 29th September 2000 for the Light Forces Anti-Tank Guided Weapon System. Initial responses are anticipated by the end of November 2000 and assessment trials are due to start in April 2001.

The initial estimate of costs are commercially confidential, but the actual costs will be dependent upon the final systems selected and the total number of systems purchased.

You also ask about expenditure on MR TRIGAT. Expenditure on the Medium Range TRIGAT Anti-Tank Guided Weapon Programme as at 31 March 2000 is £107M since Full Development began in 1988. Prior to this, Feasibility Study and Project Definition phases were combined for both Medium Range and Long Range TRIGAT. Meaningful separation of costs is therefore not possible for these stages.

Forces Personnel (Promotion)

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the average length of time is for promotion from lieutenant-colonel to colonel for *(a)* non-medical and *(b)* medical personnel in the Army. [133597]

Mr. Spellar: Based on the last four years of data for those promoted to full colonel, the average length of time served in the rank of lieutenant-colonel before promotion to colonel for *(a)* non-medical personnel is five years and five months and *(b)* medical personnel eight years and seven months.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the average length of time is for promotion from wing commander to group captain for *(a)* non-medical and *(b)* medical personnel in the RAF. [133598]

Mr. Spellar: The average length of time for promotion from wing commander to group captain is seven years for non-medical personnel, and 10 years for medical personnel in the RAF.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the average length of time is for promotion from commander to captain for *(a)* non-medical and *(b)* medical personnel in the Royal Navy. [133599]

Mr. Spellar: The average length of time for promotion from Commander to Captain in the Royal Navy for non-medical officers is 6.7 years. For medical officers, the equivalent average length of time is 11.5 years.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Bilateral Corcordat (Wales)

Mrs. Fitzsimons: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the bilateral Concordat between his Department and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales will come into force; and if he will make a statement. [134504]

Mr. Nick Brown: I am pleased to say that letters formalising the bilateral concordat between this Department and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales were exchanged on 17 October 2000. The Concordat, which is an agreement on the working relationship between the National Assembly for Wales Agriculture Department (NAWAD) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, establishes for all matters relating to the Welsh Assembly's responsibilities for agriculture, fisheries and food, an agreed framework for co-operation between the Administrations.

I look forward to continuing the close and constructive relationship that my Department has developed with NAWAD following the introduction of devolution on 1 July 1999.

Copies have been lodged in the Library of the House and the document is on the Internet at http://www.maff.gov.uk/aboutmaf/devolve/devolve.htm. The Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales is placing copies in the Library of the Welsh Assembly.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Payments

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to extend winter fuel payments to recipients of *(a)* Disability Living Allowance and *(b)* other disability-related benefits. [134212]

Angela Eagle: Disability Living Allowance and the Disability Premium in the income-related benefits are already paid in recognition of the extra costs faced by people with disabilities.

British Nuclear Test Veterans

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many war widows' pensions have been awarded to widows of British nuclear test veterans since 1970. [133842]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, records show that, since 1983, 13 awards of war widows' pension have been made in respect of conditions claimed to have resulted from exposure to excess ionising radiation during participation in the UK nuclear weapons test programme.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claims for war pensions by British nuclear test veterans who believe they might have been exposed during service to excessive ionising radiation have been *(a)* turned down and *(b)* awarded by (i) the Pensions Appeal Tribunal for Scotland and (ii) the Pensions Appeal Tribunal for England and Wales since 1970. [133843]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Disability Living Allowance

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the average income in benefits was for recipients of Disability Living Allowance in each year since 1992 at today's prices. [134213]

Mr. Bayley: Information is not available in the form requested, because some awards of income-related benefits are made for families rather than individuals. Such information as is available is in the table.

Average weekly benefit income of households in Great Britain which include a Disability Living Allowance recipient

	£
1995–96	196
1996–97	195
1997–98	197
1998–99	196

Source:
Family Resources Survey

The Government recognise the need to increase the incomes of the most severely disabled people on Income Support and have announced their intention to introduce a disability income guarantee for such people in April 2001.

Notes:

1. Estimates are based on survey data, and as such are subject to sampling error.

2. Amounts are rounded to the nearest pound.

3. The amounts are expressed at September 2000 prices and cover the years for which information is available in a comparable form.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Staff Secondments

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the private sector companies from which secondments have been made to his Department since June 1997. [133870]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1102W.

Secondments and attachments are part of the Interchange Initiatives which promote the exchange of people and good practice between the Civil Service and other organisations. Before an Interchange can occur all parties must be satisfied that no conflict of interest arises.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what accountancy firms audited and prepared the first two years of accounts for the Dome. [134174]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company's (NMEC) accounts for the first two years were audited and prepared by Ernst and Young.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what fee was paid to PricewaterhouseCoopers for the report on the finances of the Dome; and when he intends to publish the report. [134173]

Janet Anderson: PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) were paid £350,000 by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) for the report on the Dome's finances, presented to the Board on 22 August. The PWC report was placed in the Libraries of the House on 2 October.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which legal firm advised on the contracts with sponsors for the Dome. [134175]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) employed Norton Rose and Harbottles to provide legal advice on contracts with sponsors.

BBC

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will publish the guidelines he uses in assessing BBC commercial proposals. [134500]

Mr. Chris Smith: I intend to publish the guidelines tomorrow, and copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

Government Sports Strategy

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to integrate the facilities provided by fitness clubs and leisure facilities into the Government's sports strategy. [134167]

Kate Hoey: The Government's Sports Strategy "A Sporting Future for All" is based on creating opportunities for all people to take part in sport. Work is being carried out as part of the implementation of the strategy to ensure that the role local, community-based and commercial fitness and leisure centres play is fully integrated into the overall strategy. The strategy implementation subgroup charged with this task is on course to report back to Ministers at the end of the year.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Hillsborough Papers

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Hillsborough papers considered by Lord Justice Stuart-Smith in his scrutiny will be available to the general public in the Liverpool Central Library. [134326]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Liverpool Central Library has completed the sorting and cataloguing of all the papers and they are now ready for public viewing.

I understand that Liverpool City Council will give priority access, which I support, to the families of those who died in the disaster and to the survivors. The Lord Mayor made an announcement to this effect last Thursday during a conference organised specifically to discuss outstanding issues.

I am very grateful to the staff of both the House of Commons Library and the Liverpool Central Library for their efforts in this matter.

Entry Refusals

Mr. Paul Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what response he has received to the consultation paper on the refusal of entry into the United Kingdom of those with criminal convictions. [134327]

Mrs. Roche: I have received seven replies to the consultation paper. These were from the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association, the Law Society, my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) and for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones), Sports Network and a member of the public. Copies have been placed in the Library.

The responses raised no fundamental objections to the proposals set out in the consultation paper. I therefore intend to implement these, taking account of the comments received so far as possible. The relevant amendments to the Immigration Rules will be laid before Parliament for approval in due course.

Fuel Blockades

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures have been taken to reduce the risk of disruption to the fuel supply in the event of further blockades [134328]

Mr. Straw: I have been chairing a Fuel Task Force, which comprises Ministers and representatives of the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales, the oil industry, the police, the trade unions and others. Members of the Task Force signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 29 September. This establishes more robust systems to avoid disruption of fuel supplies. It commits signatories to establishing practical arrangements aimed at maintaining continuity of oil supply. In particular, it commits relevant signatories to establishing joint early warning systems and co-ordinated contingency plans; to joint emergency management systems; and to reducing the potential for intimidation of tanker drivers. Copies of the Memorandum of Understanding have been placed in the Library.

The Task Force is continuing to oversee work in support of the Memorandum. As this concerns planning to respond to any future disruption, it would not be appropriate to give further details of this work.

Additionally, preparations are being made to ensure that properly trained and qualified military drivers would be available if required to help distribute fuel to essential users. If called upon, this would be provided under the normal arrangements for providing military assistance to ensure essential supplies and services are maintained.

The events of last month demonstrated the importance of oil supplies to our economy and to our society. The economy relies on just-in-time supply chains. It benefits from their efficiency, but is vulnerable to disruption. It is not possible to eliminate all risk to oil supplies. Our aim has been the practical one of reducing the risk to the minimum.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

A27 Polegate Bypass

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what status the roundabout to be built at Cophall as part of the A27 Polegate bypass will have; if the Order as made assumed that the A27 Folkington Link extension westwards would be built; and if he will make a statement. [133807]

Mr. Hill: Cophall roundabout is being built as part of the A27 Polegate bypass on which construction commenced earlier this month. It is being constructed by virtue of a Side Roads Order under section 14 of the Highways Act 1980. During this phase the roundabout will be subject to a Trunking Order which, if made, would make maintenance the responsibility of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

The Line Order for the scheme allowed for a westward extension of the new A27, the Folkington Link. The bypass scheme was designed to allow for grade separation and for the A27 to continue underneath the junction.

Proposals to extend the A27 westwards from Cophall roundabout were excluded from the Targeted Programme of Improvements announced in 1998 and are now being considered as part of the Southampton to Folkestone multi-modal study, which commenced in July this year. In view of this the roundabout design has been amended to remove the bridges which would have carried the roundabout over the extension. The roundabout will also be lowered by 1–2 metres on its south eastern side and the adjacent screening enhanced to lessen further the impact on nearby housing. Notwithstanding the layout changes made, the new design does not preclude a westward extension being built at a later date, should such a decision be made in the light of the outcome of the multi-modal study.

2010 Horizon Plan

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy towards not applying for participation in the European Communities 2010 Horizon Plan for Inland Ports and Inland Waterways, under the TEN project, as set out in OJ C228, Volume 43, 9 August 2000; and what funds are available to participating states. [134206]

Mr. Hill: The EU is now designating ports for inclusion in the transport trans-European network (TEN) and the Government's policy is that UK ports should be included wherever they qualify. The main criterion for inclusion in the TEN inland waterway network is the ability to take vessels 80m long and 9.5m wide. One non-tidal waterway in the UK—the Manchester Ship

Canal—would qualify. However, we have proposed that Manchester and qualifying ports on tidal waterways should be included in the TEN as seaports. There are no TEN funds specifically set aside for inland waterways or ports and any bids for support from the TEN budget must compete against bids for support for road, rail, airport, and other transport infrastructure projects.

Property in Multiple Occupancy

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Government will announce plans relating to a licensing system for property in multiple occupancy. [134260]

Mr. Mullin: We issued a consultation paper last year setting out detailed proposals, and will announce conclusions in due course. We remain firmly committed to legislation when parliamentary time allows.

PRIME MINISTER

Community Budget

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if the Government approve the discharge of the 1998 Community Budget; and what representations it has made on the issue. [134200]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The Government's Annual Statement on European Community Finances (Cmnd 4771) covers the process of recommending discharges for the 1998 Community Budget.

HEALTH

Hospitals (Redbridge and Waltham Forest)

14. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he next plans to visit Redbridge and Waltham Forest Health Authority to discuss pressures on local hospitals. [131863]

Mr. Denham: We have no immediate plans to visit Redbridge and Waltham Forest Health Authority.

Hospital Beds (Barnet)

15. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the availability of hospital beds in Barnet Health Authority area. [131864]

Mr. Denham: Work is currently under way to ensure that an additional 45 beds are in place on the Barnet hospital site in time for the winter. Funding has also been approved for a further 15 beds on the same site which can be used during peaks in demand.

Hospital Waiting Times

16. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on NHS waiting times. [131865]

Mr. Denham: The average waiting time for those on the inpatient list has fallen. At the end of August the average wait was 13 weeks, two weeks less than in June 1998.

The waiting list is currently 120,000 below the level inherited. We have met and maintained our manifesto commitment to reduce waiting lists by 100,000 from the level inherited.

24. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about out-patient waiting times. [131875]

Mr. Denham: At the end of June this year there were 68,000 fewer people waiting longer than 13 weeks for an appointment than at the September 1999 peak.

Incompetent Doctors

19. **Mr. Best:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that incompetent doctors are not allowed to continue in practice. [131870]

Mr. Denham: As part of a package of reforms for protecting patients, the Government have changed the law so that the General Medical Council can swiftly impose interim suspensions or conditions where the doctor represents a danger to patients.

From next April, the new National Clinical Assessment Authority will assess poor clinical performance cases and recommend remedial action.

Poverty (Manchester)

21. **Mr. Tony Lloyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the link between poverty and health in Manchester. [131872]

Mr. Denham: There are a number of social, economic and environmental factors which contribute to poor health in Manchester. Both the White Paper, "Our Healthier Nation", and the NHS Plan acknowledge the links between poverty and health. A series of inter-departmental initiatives are in place to tackle the underlying inequalities, for example the Manchester, Salford and Trafford health action zone, the Healthy Cities programme and the New Deal for communities.

Out-patient Waiting Lists (North-west)

22. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made in reducing out-patient waiting lists in the North-west. [131873]

Mr. Denham: Reducing waiting time for outpatient appointments is a Government priority. In the North-west, measures have been implemented including Outpatient Improvement Plans, an additional investment of £13 million on schemes having a direct impact on outpatient waiting times, and the sharing of good practice through "A Step by Step guide to improving outpatient services". Between June 1999 and June 2000, despite increased demand, these initiatives have been successful in reducing by 7,292 (8.8 per cent.) the number of patients waiting more than 13 weeks for an outpatient appointment. The NHS is aiming to achieve further reductions by March 2001.

Elderly People

23. **Mr. Cox:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent discussions he has had, and with whom, about improving long-term care and health care for elderly people. [131874]

Mr. Hutton: I have regular contact with NHS, social services and voluntary sector to discuss the Government's plans to improve long-term care and healthcare for older people. Yesterday I met with key stakeholders from the voluntary sector, local government and the professions to discuss the implementation of our long-term care proposals.

Postcode Prescribing

25. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about progress by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence in eliminating prescribing based on postcode areas. [131877]

Mrs. Gorman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about progress by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence in eliminating postcode prescribing. [131871]

Mr. Denham: I welcome the progress which the National Institute for Clinical Excellence has already made. Authoritative, evidence-based guidance has been issued on a wide range of subjects including drug treatments. We have provided additional funding to enable the NHS to implement these recommendations and will be following up through performance management to ensure that they are taken up.

Diamorphine

26. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many registered drug-user patients are being supplied diamorphine (heroin) on the NHS; and what is the total cost. [131878]

Mr. Denham: Diamorphine, in the treatment of drug addiction, is used as part of a maintenance regime in a very small minority of patients, who are generally the most difficult cases. The Misuse of Drugs (Supply to Addicts) Regulations 1997 require that only medical practitioners who hold a special licence issued by the Home Secretary may prescribe, administer or supply diamorphine in the treatment of drug addiction; other practitioners must refer any addict who requires these drugs to a treatment centre.

Diamorphine is also used for analgesia in palliative care. General practitioners and other doctors may prescribe diamorphine for patients (including addicts) for relief of pain without a special licence.

The total cost of diamorphine treatment for drug addiction cannot be calculated accurately as data are not collected centrally which link prescription to diagnosis.

Dentists (Sedation Techniques)

27. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his plans to increase facilities for the training of dentists in sedation techniques. [131879]

Mr. Hutton: We have accepted the recommendations in the report from the review of general anaesthesia and sedation for dental treatment, which was led by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Dental Officer. We want to see methods of pain and anxiety control other than general anaesthesia used whenever possible and are exploring the need, and ways, for increasing the provision of training in sedation.

Winter Pressures

28. **Valerie Davey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to combat winter pressures in the acute hospital sector. [131880]

Ms Stuart: The National Health Service has been planning for this winter for some time, working closely with social services and building on experience over previous years. All NHS trusts are members of local winter planning groups, working with other health and social services organisations. We have provided an additional £660 million to provide additional capacity both for winter and to meet demand throughout the year. This funding includes £60 million for an improved flu campaign and £142.5 million to provide over 340 additional adult critical care beds.

Health Professsionals (Standards)

29. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his plans for the regulation of the professional standards of health professionals. [131881]

Mr. Denham: We have published for consultation, plans for modernising the regulation of nurses, midwives and health visitors and of the professions supplementary to medicine. The consultation period ends on 1 November. Specific proposals for legislation will subsequently be issued for further consultation.

Road Traffic Accidents

30. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the central recovery unit recovered from NHS trust accident and emergency hospitals in respect of road traffic accidents in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000. [131882]

Mr. Hutton: In 1998–99, National Health Service trusts had responsibility for collecting charges for hospital treatment following road traffic accidents under the provisions of sections 157 and 158 of the Road Traffic Act 1988. NHS trusts in England collected a total of £19.6 million in that year. The system changed with the introduction of the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Act 1999 which came into effect on 5 April 1999 and there is now a new centralised recovery system which is undertaken by the Compensation Recovery Unit (CRU). The CRU recovered £26.6 million for NHS trusts in England in 1999–2000. However this sum does not represent total income to the NHS in that year. This is because income would have been received directly by trusts in the first part of the year as a carry-over from the old arrangements. We are unable to calculate the amounts carried over from the old system as this information is not collected centrally. The total amount collected for the first half of 2000–01 in England is £30.3 million.

Beta Interferon (Gloucestershire)

31. **Mr. Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health, if he will make a statement on the prescribing of beta interferon in Gloucestershire. [131883]

Mr. Denham: In Gloucestershire Health Authority beta interferon is prescribed to patients with relapsing/remitting multiple sclerosis who fulfil the clinical criteria of the guidelines of the Association of British Neurologists. The health authority has provided additional funding of £300,000 a year to meet the costs of this treatment. This policy will be reviewed following the publication of guidance by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence.

Age Discrimination

32. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he has taken to end age discrimination against patients in the NHS. [131884]

Mr. Hutton: Discrimination on the grounds of age within the National Health Service is totally unacceptable. The NHS Plan made it clear that we will challenge and remove any practices which discriminate against older people. The National Service Framework for Older People, which will set new national standards for the NHS and social care will be published later this year and introduced from April 2001. The new national standards will ensure that ageism is not tolerated in the NHS.

Private Hospitals

33. **Mr. Ennis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to regulate standards of care provided in private hospitals. [131885]

Ms Stuart: Independent healthcare is currently regulated under the Registered Homes Act 1984. We recognise the deficiencies with the present system and that it has not kept pace with the developments in independent healthcare over the past two decades. The Government are therefore putting in place a new modern regulatory framework for the independent healthcare sector, through the Care Standards Act 2000. One of the main elements of the Act is to establish a new independent body, the National Care Standards Commission, which will regulate independent hospitals to proper modern standards. The Act will put in place a regulatory system that will ensure the delivery of quality services, proper accountability by the provider, and flexibility to allow the regulatory framework to respond to developments in the healthcare field.

To ensure consistency and quality of service provision the Commission will inspect against national minimum standards for each of the services to be regulated, ensuring that patients can have confidence in the quality and safety of the services that they receive. Work is currently progressing on the development of the national minimum standards in consultation with patients, providers, inspectors, healthcare professionals and specialists. Once the standards are developed they will be the subject of a full public consultation in April 2001.

GP Training

34. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to encourage GPs to undertake in-service training. [131886]

Mr. Denham: Learning must be lifelong and cannot cease at the end of formal training. The existing general medical services arrangements for general practitioners include incentives to keep their knowledge up to date through a balanced programme of postgraduate education. This is mirrored in the new core contract for personal medical services.

In addition, the National Health Service Plan outlines a new quality agenda for the health service. Continuing professional development (CPD) is central to this and to ensuring that all GPs, doctors and other professional staff can meet the highest quality standards. The plan commits us to investing an extra £140 million by 2003–04.

We are therefore committed to developing all professionals in primary care and are currently developing, in consultation with the profession, a programme for delivering quality, with a strong emphasis on CPD.

Health Action Zones

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to announce the funding allocations for Health Action Zones for 2001–02. [131867]

Mr. Hutton: Decisions on funding levels for Health Action Zones have not yet been made. We will make an announcement as soon as we are able.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what conclusion he has reached on the funding of beta interferon. [131869]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence has not yet published its final guidance on beta interferon for the treatment of multiple sclerosis and it would not be appropriate to pre-empt what the final guidance might say. The Government have provided the National Health Service with adequate funding to enable health authorities to fund treatments which NICE recommends.

Private Sector Secondments

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the private sector companies from which secondments have been made to his Department since June 1997. [133876]

Ms Stuart: Secondments and attachments are part of the Interchange Initiative which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between the Civil Service and other organisations. Before an Interchange can occur, all parties must be satisfied that no conflict of interest arises.

Central Records indicate the secondments have been made to the Department from the following companies since June 1997:

Private Finance Panel Executive
Tarmac plc
Naborro Nathanson
Pinsent Curtis
Rawlings Ophthalmic Opticians
Hempsons
PriceWaterhouseCoopers

Ward Hadawy
Beachcroft Stanleys
Dickinson Dees
Lloyds Bank
Addleshaw Booth & Co.
Berwin leighton
Taylor Woodrow
Deloitte & Touche
Herbert Smith
British Airways.

Organ Transplants

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what (1) action is being taken to increase public awareness of the NHS Organ Donor Register; and if he will make a statement; [133975]

(2) what percentage of the population has joined the NHS Organ Donor Register. [133974]

Mr. Denham: Our current organ donation campaign, launched in 1998, is ongoing. It encourages people to join the National Health Service Organ Donor Register, carry the donor card and, most importantly, discuss their wishes with their friends and family.

The percentage of the population who have joined the NHS Organ Donor Register—as of 31 December 1999 are:

	England
Registrations	7,167,917
Percentage of population	14.3

Food Safety

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on new rules and regulations proposed by the European Community concerning the labelling, storage, use, cooking and servicing of foodstuffs on public premises, stating what consultation has been made with *(a)* UK local authorities, *(b)* HM Government and *(c)* similar bodies in member states of the European Community. [134182]

Ms Stuart: Proposed Regulations of the European Parliament and of the Council to consolidate and simplify existing European Union food hygiene legislation were adopted by the European Commission on the 18 July 2000. The proposals apply to food businesses throughout the food chain and are intended to reflect a need for clearer and up-to-date rules providing a high level of health protection for consumers.

The Food Standards Agency began an extensive public consultation exercise on 28 July 2000. In addition to making the proposals available on the Food Standards Agency website, copies were sent to all United Kingdom local authorities, all major food industry stakeholders, various consumer groups and other interested organisations. The proposals will be the subject of parliamentary scrutiny in the normal way.

Following completion of consultations, all comments will be analysed with a view to forming a UK position on the proposal.

NHS (Private Finance Initiative)

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of the Private Finance Initiative on improvements to facilities in the NHS. [131860]

Mr. Denham: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State earlier today, column 108.

Heart Disease

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his Department's initiatives to combat heart disease in the United Kingdom. [131866]

Yvette Cooper: Tackling heart disease is a key priority. The National Service Framework for heart disease sets standards for prevention, treatment and care and provides significant further investment in services. To tackle the root causes of heart disease we have major programmes of work on tackling smoking and improving diet and physical activity.

Waiting Lists (Eastbourne)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he proposes to introduce to reduce hospital waiting lists in Eastbourne. [131876]

Ms Stuart: The Government have provided Eastbourne Hospitals National Health Service Trust: £1.3 million this year to spend on additional activity to address waiting lists and waiting times; £133,000 for a third wave booked admission project for general surgery and gynaecological day cases; and £844,000 capital funding for initiatives to address out-patient waiting lists.

CABINET OFFICE

Late Payment

Mr. Efford: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will seek to amend the Late Payments of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998 to ensure that small companies automatically receive interest from Government organisations on late payments made after 30 days of being invoiced. [134104]

Mr. Stringer: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given earlier today by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 25 October 2000

SOCIAL SECURITY

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many inquiries have been received concerning eligibility for the Minimum Income Guarantee since the campaign was launched in June 2000 *(a)* nationally, *(b)* from Plymouth, Sutton constituency, *(c)* from Plymouth, Devonport constituency, *(d)* from South-West Devon constituency and *(e)* from the City of Plymouth. [134311]

Mr. Bayley: Since the announcement of our plans at the end of March, we have received around 500,000 inquiries in response to the Minimum Income Guarantee take-up campaign. We do not hold information on inquiries made at a local level.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners he estimates are *(a)* eligible for, and *(b)* claiming the Minimum Income Guarantee in (i) Plymouth, Sutton constituency, (ii) Plymouth, Devonport constituency, (iii) South-West Devon constituency and (iv) the City of Plymouth. [134310]

Mr. Bayley: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Income support pensioners by parliamentary constituency and unitary authority—May 2000

Thousand

Area	*Number of claimants*
Plymouth, Sutton	3.2
Plymouth, Devonport	2.5
South-West Devon	1.6
Plymouth	6.7

Notes:
1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.
3. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where the claimant and/or their partner are aged 60 or over.

Source:
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, May 2000.

In addition, some half a million pensioners in Great Britain are missing out on their entitlement. We cannot routinely disaggregate take-up statistics for the income-related benefits. Inspection of the available data suggests that take-up of Minimum Income Guarantee in Devon is likely to be broadly the same as take-up for Great Britain as a whole.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent contacts he has had with *(a)* the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and *(b)* the BBC about the administrative arrangements for the free television licence scheme. [134543]

Mr. Rooker: The Department has been working closely with officials in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and with the BBC on the administrative arrangements for the free TV licence scheme. I have been briefed by the BBC on the procedures to be used.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Mental Health

Mr. Heppell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the outcome of the Government's consultation on its proposals for managing dangerous people with severe personality disorders; and what progress has been made on them. [135201]

Mr. Boateng: I refer my hon. Friend, to the reply I gave him on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 1167–68W.

The Government's proposals for those who are Dangerous and Severely Personality Disordered (D and SPD) address a longstanding challenge to public safety by ensuring that effective powers of detention and high quality services are available to deal with this group. The consultation period for these proposals ended on 31 December 1999. A summary of the analysis of the consultation will today be placed in the Library together with copies of individual responses, where permission to publish was not withheld.

Of those expressing a preference, the majority of respondents to the consultation exercise preferred option B as the more effective way of providing high quality services for this group. The Home Affairs Committee in its report published on 14 March strongly supported option B. The Government attach great weight to these views. However, the Government have decided that before taking final decisions on how best to provide services for this group in the long term, they need to pilot and to evaluate the assessment process and the various treatments available for this group within existing service structures. This period of piloting and evaluation will however take place at the same time as the expansion of dedicated specialist facilities within both the Prison Service and the National Health Service (NHS) and the introduction, as soon as parliamentary time permits, of new powers of detention for the assessment and treatment of this group.

Following the recent Spending Review, I announced during the summer the allocation of substantial resources to pilot and develop new services for those who are D and SPD. This will mean 320 new specialist secure places across the Prison Service and the NHS by the end of the Spending Review period. The first pilot project at Her Majesty's Prison Whitemoor in the Prison Service has already begun and the first NHS pilot at Rampton Hospital will commence in November.

At the same time, we are pressing ahead with the preparations for those legislative changes which will be required under either option. For example, arrangements

for the assessment process and detention, and for safeguards and review, will apply whether those detained are held in existing services or in a new third service.

Following the recent review of the Mental Health Act 1983, the Government believe that these changes can be made as part of wider changes to that Act. The effective implementation of new arrangements will require the provision of new, high quality, specialist services for this group which will be part of the process of service development and piloting. Access to these services will be managed through a plan of care and treatment appropriate to the individual. Subject to the results of the pilot projects, these powers would be available for this group as soon as they have been implemented. As my earlier reply indicated, these proposals will be published in detail in a White Paper before Christmas.

HEALTH

Correspondence

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when Mrs. M. Blee, a constituent of the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, will receive answers to her letters of 20 December 1999, 11 February, 23 February and 4 April. [134143]

Ms Stuart: The Department has records of some correspondence from Mrs. M. Blee. Replies to Mrs. Blee's correspondence of 23 February and 4 April were sent on 27 June and 8 June. There is no trace of receiving correspondence dated 20 December and 11 February. The Department has asked for copies of these earlier letters in order that a full reply can be provided.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Ministerial Meeting (Sydney)

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about the meeting between the Minister for Sport and the President of the International Olympic Committee in Sydney on 27 September. [134284]

Kate Hoey: I met with Juan Antonio Samaranch, President of the International Olympic Committee while at the Olympic Games and Bob Steadwood, President of the International Paralympic Committee while at the Paralympic Games. These were informal meetings and we had discussions on issues relating to the Olympic and Paralympic Games and sport generally.

National Athletics Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 415–16W, (1) if he has received the business feasibility study on the Lee Valley Stadium; if he will place a copy in the Library; and if he will make a statement; [134286]

(2) if he has received the technical feasibility study on the Lee Valley Stadium; if he will place a copy in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [134285]

Kate Hoey: I received a copy of the business planning study on 10 October and the final version of the technical feasibility studies on 18 October. The Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, who commissioned both reports, have said they will shortly publish summaries of the reports' conclusions. I will ensure that a copy of both summaries is placed in the Library.

London Olympic Bid

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects to receive the feasibility studies on a London Olympic bid prepared by the British Olympic Association. [134283]

Kate Hoey: We expect the British Olympic Association (BOA) to present their work on the feasibility of a London Olympic bid to my Department by the end of the year.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

China

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the principal results of his visit to China. [134309]

Mr. Prescott: I visited China from 12 to 18 October at the invitation of Vice Premier Wu Bangguo. My purpose was to enhance bilateral relations and promote UK business interests in China.

I visited Beijing, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Guilin, and Chongqing. In Beijing I had meetings with Vice President Hu Jintao, Vice Premiers Wu Bangguo and Wen Jiabao, other Government Ministers and the Mayor of Beijing. I also opened the Second Session of the UK China Forum with Vice Premier Wu Bangguo.

In Shenzhen I attended with Vice Premier Wu Bangguo the opening of the China High-Tech Fair, at which there was a strong British presence. In Shenzhen and the other cities I visited I held meetings with senior provincial and city politicians.

My discussions with Chinese political leaders covered bilateral relations, commercial matters, international issues, the environment, and human rights. I was received with great warmth throughout my visit and was left in no doubt as to the strength of UK/China political relations. I was particularly impressed by the effort that China is making to ensure that she develops in a sustainable way as she modernises for the 21st century, and the opportunities which exist for British companies to work with her in that modernisation.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Employment Tribunals

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what date he intends *(a)* to make and *(b)* to lay before Parliament, regulations to enable members of the Bar and solicitors in Scotland and

Northern Ireland who are qualified for appointment as chairmen of employment tribunals in those regions, to be eligible for appointment in England and Wales. [134247]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Work is in progress on the necessary amendment to the Industrial Tribunals (Constitution and Rules of Procedure) Regulations 1993 which we aim to make before the end of this year and to lay once statutory consultation is completed.

Petroleum Licensing

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps are being taken to prepare for future petroleum licensing rounds on the UK continental shelf. [135200]

Mrs. Liddell: I have today initiated a three month public consultation which will look at the potential environmental impact of oil and gas activity in the area between the Shetland and Faroe Islands known as the 'White Zone'.

A formal invitation will shortly be made to oil companies to bid for licences in this area. But before any licences are awarded, I want to hear the views of the public and experts on the environmental impact that these activities might have. Depending on the outcome of this consultation, we may impose conditions on the licences or withhold areas on offer.

For the first time, the Department has commissioned and published an independent strategic environmental assessment of the White Zone, the surrounding area and the possible oil and gas impacts on it. This report will be made available to interested parties and should help promote informed responses to the consultation.

The consultation also asks for views on draft regulations applying the EU's Habitats Directive, which requires the protection of certain species and habitats, to offshore oil and gas activities. Under the regulations, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State must consider the requirements of the Directive when taking decisions relating to those activities.

Today's proposals mark a further major improvement to the transparency of our environmental and licensing regimes. They demonstrate the importance Government and industry continue to place on protecting marine habitats and species.

However, it is also important to provide further opportunities for petroleum exploration on the UK Continental Shelf. The proposed changes will provide a stronger legal and environmental framework for future offshore licensing rounds.

The 19th licensing round applications, which should be received early next year, will be the first to be considered under this new approach.

Maintaining oil and gas discoveries over the coming years is vital if we are to sustain an important industry and benefit the UK economy.

Oil Company Profits

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will investigate the profits of oil companies in respect of the sale of petrol and diesel. [134338]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition legislation, the Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring markets and considering complaints about anti-competitive behaviour. If the Director General has any concerns about profitability in this context, he has powers to investigate.

Medicines

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the possible abolition of resale price maintenance on the sale of over-the-counter medicines. [134789]

Dr. Howells: The question of retaining or abolishing resale price maintenance on over-the-counter medicines is a matter for the Restrictive Practices Court. The case is currently before the court.

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces and Cadets Association

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 12 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 509–10W, what changes there have been to the location and structures of the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association since that answer. [134501]

Mr. Spellar: Following the laying of the Defence Council's Reserve Forces Act 1996 (Reserve Associations) Order 2000, the Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations (RFCA) for the South East and Eastern Wessex administrative areas, minus Dorset, have been amalgamated to reflect the South East Government Office and Channel Islands administrative jurisdictions. It will be known as the South East RFCA, with a headquarters at Seely House, Shoe Lane, Aldershot GU11 2HJ. The responsibility for carrying out the Eastern Wessex Association's functions for Dorset moves to the Wessex RFCA, whose administrative area will now reflect that of the South West Government Office region. The Wessex RFCA headquarters remains at 2 Beaufort Road, Clifton, Bristol BS8 2JS.

These arrangements took effect from 1 October 2000. They are reflected in minor amendments to the RFCA Regulations, details of which have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. We have also agreed with the RFCAs revised or amended Schemes of Association. Following consultation with their Trade Union representatives, arrangements for those Association employees opting for redundancy have been agreed. These are broadly in line with civil service arrangements. This completes the implementation of the organisational improvements and efficiencies sought in the Strategic Defence Review.

Soothsayer

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what timetable has been set for Lockheed Martin Systems Integration and Thomson Racal Defence to assess the requirements of the Soothsayer integrated electronic warfare system; and if he will make a statement; [134256]

(2) which companies bid for the contract for the Soothsayer electronic warfare programme other than Lockheed Martin Systems Integration and Oswego and Thomson Racal Defence; and if he will make a statement; [134254]

(3) when the electronic warfare management information system included in Soothsayer will be completed; at what cost to the programme; and if he will make a statement; [134252]

(4) what assessment he has made of the cost efficiency of *(a)* the Soothsayer electronic warfare system and *(b)* the stand-alone systems currently deployed in the British Army and Royal Marines; and if he will make a statement. [134253]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 25 October 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence concerning Soothsayer.

You asked when the Management Information System (MIS) for Soothsayer would be completed. Lockheed Martin System Integration and Thomson Racal Defence are undertaking studies that will help establish proposed schedules and the cost to completion, of the electronic warfare MIS included in Soothsayer as part of the ongoing Assessment Phase. A Soothsayer capability will be delivered into service in 2006. However, to keep pace with changing operational needs a programme of continuous evolution of the MIS software is planned beyond initial delivery. Initial project costings established during the Concept Studies prior to Initial Gate will be validated by the Assessment Phase studies to support the forthcoming Main Gate approval, but the total costs for Soothsayer procurement and initial support are estimated at this stage to be in the order of £170M at 1999/00 economic conditions. It will be for the contractors to cost MIS elements as part of their overall bids for the demonstration and production phase contracts at Main Gate. The expected costs of the programme will be firmed up at that point.

You asked about the cost efficiency of the system. In accordance with Smart Acquisition guidelines the expected cost effectiveness of the Soothsayer electronic warfare system was assessed as part of the Initial Gate business case approved in Aug 00. This report also assessed the cost effectiveness of standalone systems currently deployed in the British Army and Royal Marines. As part of the Assessment Phase the cost effectiveness of Soothsayer and its alternatives will be continually monitored to inform the Main Gate submission.

Bids for the Soothsayer electronic warfare programme Assessment Phase were received from Lockheed Martin Systems Integration (Owego, NY,USA), Thomson Racal Defence (Bracknell, UK) and Raytheon Systems (Falls Church, Virginia, USA). Raytheon were teamed with BAe Defence Systems, (Christchurch, UK) and Alenia Marconi Systems, (Frimley, UK).

You asked for the timetable for assessment. In line with Smart Acquisition practice the requirements for the Soothsayer integrated electronic warfare system will be assessed in conjunction with Lockheed Martin Systems Integration and Thomson Racal Defence during the ongoing Assessment Phase (August 00 to August 02) leading to a Main Gate decision in 2002.

E-business Projects

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what budget his Department has for e-business projects. [132178]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The Ministry of Defence (MOD) does not have a separately identified budget for e-business projects. Exploitation of new electronic means of doing business—which might also be labelled as e-commerce, e-Government, or responding to the information age—is taking place across the range of MOD activities. The budget for any given project therefore normally forms part of the wider budget for the individual MOD management area that is responsible for its delivery. Nevertheless, there are a number of MOD projects of this type that are of sufficient size and importance for their individual budgets to be readably identifiable. These include the following:

Defence Electronic Commerce Service (DECS)

The Defence Logistics Organisation is developing DECS, a new electronic procurement system that will include on-line catalogues of products and automatic transaction facilities. DECS will provide the MOD with a single view of the Services' procurement needs and transactions, allow communication across a variety of technologies and departments, and speed up purchasing. The current provision for the DECS project is £45 million over 10 years.

Modernising Government Delivery

The Defence Procurement Agency is developing shared data environments with industrial partners on major equipment programmes and investing in web-based publishing and information exchange in business areas that communicate with industry and the general public. The current provision for this project is £10.5 million over five years.

On-line weather services and UK Hydrographic Office Information Services

The UK Meteorological Office and the UK Hydrographic Office provide specialist services on-line to industry and the general public. The UK Meteorological Office provides on-line weather forecasts and Severe Weather Warnings and can accept payment electronically. It is also developing mobile Internet and digital TV services. The overall cost of this programme is £2.5 million for this financial year. The UK Hydrographic Office is developing an on-line service for customers to request and pay for hydrographic information. The estimated cost of this programme is £7.5 million over five years.

Electronic Purchasing Service

The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency is implementing an electronic central inquiry service, information request service, and electronic purchasing to serve Government Departments, industry and the general public. The estimated start-up cost of this programme is £7.8 million.

In addition, the MOD remains committed to using the best available electronic technologies to improve our operational capabilities and enhance the effectiveness of the UK Armed Forces.

Further information on MOD IT projects delivering business support and front-line military capability is available in my letter to the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch), dated 25 January 2000, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

In concert with other Government Departments, the MOD is producing a Departmental e-business strategy that will outline how we intend to achieve the Government's electronic service delivery targets. This document is expected to be published later this year and will be updated regularly.

Eurofighter

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recommendations the Government received pertaining to the installation of the cannon in the Eurofighter; for what reason a cannon was an original feature; and if he will make a statement. [134183]

Mr. Hoon: The cannon was originally included in the European Staff Requirement for Eurofighter as a close range air-to-air weapon. The improved minimum range capability of Eurofighter's Advanced Short Range Air-to-Air Missile over previous such missiles, together with the pattern of operations over the last decade, mean that the gun now has only a minimal operational utility, and this is outweighed by its support, fatigue and training cost implications.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the Prime Minister's answer of 17 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 2W, on Eurofighter, if he will define offensive air support in the context of his reply; and to what extent the 27 mm Mauser cannon was identified as an asset in that role of the Eurofighter. [134199]

Mr. Hoon: Further to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's answer of 17 July, offensive air support is a term used to describe air action against hostile land targets which are either in close proximity to, or in a position directly to affect, friendly forces. The original European Staff Requirement for Eurofighter does not identify the cannon as an asset in that role.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Chicken Farms (Kosovo)

7. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many chicken farms her Department is funding in Kosovo. [132187]

Mr. Foulkes: As part of our contribution to rehabilitation in Kosovo we funded a range of micro-projects to help repair facilities and support income-generation. This included start-up costs for four chicken farms.

Sierra Leone

8. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what new initiatives she proposes to take in Sierra Leone. [132188]

Clare Short: In Sierra Leone we are already providing budgetary support, humanitarian relief and assistance to improve the effectiveness of Government particulars in financial management and anti-corruption.

The challenge in Sierra Leone is to extend Government control over the half of the country currently dominated by the rebels. For this reason we are providing equipment, training and advice to the new Sierra Leone army, strengthening the police and supporting improved management of the UN peacekeeping operation.

Departmental Funding (Central and Eastern Europe)

9. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on funding by her Department for the countries of central and eastern Europe. [132189]

Mr. Foulkes: Our financial support to countries in central eastern Europe last year was £150 million through the EC and £182 million in direct spending—over £100 million of which was humanitarian relief for Kosovo.

The purpose of our spending is to improve economic management and Government effectiveness in order to better the lives of the people, particularly the poorest.

Rwanda

10. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on Rwanda's progress in poverty reduction. [132190]

Clare Short: The Government of Rwanda's commitment to poverty reduction is strong. They have embarked on an ambitious programme of recovery from conflict, through national reconciliation and poverty reduction. The Government face many challenges but are committed to meeting the International Development Targets.

Ukraine

11. **Mr. Wareing:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's assistance to Ukraine. [132191]

Clare Short: Over the last five years we have provided over £44 million in direct assistance to Ukraine and expect to provide around £9 million this year. The UK also assists Ukraine through its contributions to multilateral agencies, including an average of £10 million a year as the UK share of European Community assistance.

Our objective in the Ukraine is to support the process of transition in a way which brings sustainable benefits to all levels of society with particular focus on poor and vulnerable groups. Over 30 per cent. of the population of Ukraine live in poverty.

12. **Mr. Cox:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what projects her Department is developing with the Ukraine, with particular reference to the issue of street children; and if she will make a statement. [132192]

Clare Short: Many of Ukraine's street children come from state orphanages. We are working with UNICEF to develop alternatives to institutional care, and to help establish a foster care system in four regions in Ukraine. We are also supporting the training of Ukraine's social workers, to increase their capacity to address the needs of vulnerable children, including street children.

Education

13. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the work of her Department in promoting education. [132193]

Clare Short: Investing in basic education is vitally important for development and poverty reduction. Since May 1997 we have committed over £400 million to helping governments in developing countries to put in place sustainable education systems able to provide high-quality primary education to all their children.

15. **Mr. Geraint Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the effectiveness of investment in women's education in reducing poverty in the developing world. [132195]

Clare Short: Investment in education for girls has been shown consistently to be one of the most important determinants of development, with positive implications for all other measures of progress. World bank research has demonstrated that education increases the likelihood of women choosing to have smaller, healthier families and deciding to send their own children to school.

Nearly 900 million people are illiterate, and some 600 million of these are women. We are strongly committed to the international development targets of achieving universal primary education (UPE) by 2015 and gender equity in primary and secondary schooling by 2005. Achievement of UPE requires a strong commitment to gender equality. It needs a consciousness throughout the education system that changes of attitude and practice are necessary. We have in the last three years committed £400 million to support primary education programmes, all with a strong focus on gender equality. We will do more.

22. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions took place at the annual World bank-IMF meeting in September on adopting a global initiative on education. [132203]

Clare Short: In the Development Committee, Ministers discussed progress in the implementation of the country-led approach to development embodied in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Programmes (PRSP) process and Comprehensive Development Framework. We and others have repeatedly made it clear that education should feature prominently in countries' poverty reduction strategies.

The UK Ministerial Statement to the Development Committee reiterated our commitment to Education for All. We said:

> We need to build on the strong political commitment by national governments and the international community to the goals of education for all, which were re-affirmed at the Dakar World Education Forum in April. Education is at the heart of development, but real progress towards education for all will only be achieved and sustained within well-defined, country-owned strategies for the sector, firmly set within broader development and budgetary frameworks. We are wary of interpretations of the Framework for Action agreed at Dakar which imply separate funds for education, new mechanisms and new conditionalities. We will continue to argue that the way forward is to ensure that education, and basic education in particular, is given the priority it deserves within PRSPs.

23. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the proportion of her departmental budget to be allocated for education over the next three years. [132204]

Clare Short: We are committed to the international development targets of achieving universal primary education by 2015 and gender equity in primary and secondary schooling by 2015, and to increasing investment in lifelong learning and skills development. Education is vitally important for development and poverty reduction and will continue to be given high priority in DFID's bilateral and multilateral programmes. We have committed £400 million to this work over the last three years and will do more.

21. **Mr. Worthington:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if, following the comprehensive spending review, she has new proposals for attaining the international goal of universal primary education by 2015. [132201]

Clare Short: Real progress towards education for all will only be achieved and sustained within well-defined, country-owned strategies for the sector, firmly set within broader development and budgetary frameworks. We are opposed to any interpretation of the Framework for Action agreed at Dakar which calls for separate funds for education, new mechanisms and new conditionalities. We believe that the way forward is to ensure that education, and basic education in particular, is given priority within Poverty Reduction Strategy Programmes (PRSPs). It was agreed at Dakar, and reaffirmed by the G8 at Okinawa, that the international community will respond positively to requests for assistance from countries with sound education strategies. We have committed £400 million to primary education over the last three years and will do more.

HIV/AIDS

14. **Mr. McCabe:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the priorities are for her Department's work on HIV/AIDS. [132194]

Clare Short: The HIV/AIDS epidemic is an unprecedented threat to development and a human tragedy of vast proportions. The fight against HIV/AIDS is a key priority for my Department. We continue to focus on prevention, but we also place great emphasis on reducing the personal, social and economic impact of illness and death caused by the disease.

Last year my Department spent over £53 million on HIV/AIDS work and a further £35 million on reproductive health. We will do more.

Globalisation and Development

16. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what consultation she has carried out on her White Paper on globalisation and development. [132196]

Clare Short: We have consulted widely with organisations and individuals here and in developing countries as part of the preparation of the White Paper on Globalisation and Development. In March, an outline of the White Paper was sent out to key institutions and a website established. We invited submissions from interested individuals and organisations and we received a substantial number of thoughtful contributions. My Department followed up many of these submissions with meetings and discussions. In addition, I have chaired round-tables on globalisation and development with representatives of developing countries, and have held many other high-level seminars.

St. Helena

17. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress made towards providing an airfield on St. Helena. [132197]

Clare Short: The comparative study of air and sea access is currently underway. The study team visited St. Helena last week and we expect their draft report to be produced by the end of this year. The final report and its recommendations will then need to be considered and discussed with the St. Helena Government. The results of the study cannot be prejudged and no presumption can be made that it will lead to support being offered for the provision of an airfield.

Iraq

18. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in Iraq following the withdrawal of UN officials. [132198]

Clare Short: The increase in the oil price will allow $16 billion to be spent on humanitarian needs in Iraq this year. Living conditions continue to improve in Iraq, in contrast to those parts controlled by Saddam Hussein. The Government of Iraq have also refused to co-operate with the preparation of an independent report of the humanitarian situation in Iraq, or to allow experts in to consider possible ways of using oil revenues to meet local costs. The UK provides some £6 million of bilateral humanitarian aid to Iraq through international organisations.

Cameroon

19. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to support poverty reduction programmes in Cameroon; and if she will make a statement. [132199]

Clare Short: We are supporting poverty reduction in Cameroon in the forestry sector. Many of Cameroon's poorest people live in, and are dependent on, the forest zones for their livelihoods. We plan to intensify this by working closely with Government, civil society and other international agencies to support a sector reform programme. The UK supported Cameroon's bid for access to the heavily Indebted Poor Countries' initiative (HIPC). To ensure that the resources released are targeted on poverty reduction, we will continue to press for action to reduce the high levels of corruption and strengthen financial management in the public sector.

Arms

20. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact which the availability of arms in developing countries has on the stability of those countries. [132200]

Clare Short: It is well known that the proliferation of small arms has a deleterious effect on stability in developing countries and that development cannot be sustained where there is instability. We are supporting projects that address the proliferation of small arms, including the reform of police and security forces, and have been active in developing a rigorous UK policy in connection with the UN Conference on The Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects which will take place in 2001.

Conflict Resolution

24. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's contribution to conflict resolution. [132205]

Clare Short: We are contributing to efforts to support conflict prevention, reduction and management worldwide, both through our development and humanitarian assistance programmes, and through our support to international institutions, most notably the UN and the EC.

We recognise that a reduction in armed conflict is an essential precondition for the achievement of sustainable development. We are pursuing a number of targeted strategies for conflict reduction and the promotion of sustainable peace in post conflict countries.

Arrangements are also in hand for the implementation of two new interdepartmental initiatives on Conflict Prevention to enhance collaboration between my Department, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence. One will be for Africa—to be managed by a Ministerial Committee headed by myself; and the second for the Rest of the World—to be managed by a Ministerial Committee headed by the Foreign Secretary.

Dams

25. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to ensure that development assistance is not granted for the construction of dams whose effect would be to restrict the flow to countries downstream. [132206]

Clare Short: We are not currently involved in providing development assistance for dam construction but we understand the importance of dams for water storage, and the regulation of river flows. We also recognise the potentially negative effects of dams, including changes to downstream flow regimes. In this context both insufficient releases during times of low flow, and excess releases in times of flood, are of equal relevance. Both have potentially devastating effects on the lives and livelihoods of people living downstream. We look forward to the launch of the report of the World Commission on Dams, in London next month, for which we have contributed financial support. This will provide guidance on balancing the positive developmental benefits of dams, against the detrimental social and environmental impacts. It will inform any future assistance we may give on dams projects, and provide a basis for a position paper on dams and development that we will issue next year.

European Union Aid

26. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with her counterparts in other European Union member states about the efficient delivery of European Union aid to developing countries. [132207]

Clare Short: I frequently meet my counterparts from the other EU member states. We most recently met as a group at the May 2000 Development Council. My Under-Secretary of State attended a seminar in Paris in June to discuss reform with EU Development Ministers and officials and non-governmental organisations. I met the French Development Minister, Charles Josselin, in July to discuss plans for improving EC development policy during the current French Presidency of the Union. This issue will also be discussed at the next meeting of the Development Council on 10 November.

International Monetary Fund

27. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the activities of the IMF as they affect developing countries, following its annual meeting. [132208]

Clare Short: At the Annual Meetings, IMF Governors including the UK strongly supported the objective of making globalisation work for all and reaffirmed the importance of the IMF's role in developing countries. The IMF's key responsibilities are to promote international financial stability, contribute to the establishment of sound macro-economic and financial policies and encourages pro-poor economic growth. The Government particularly welcome the commitment to speed up progress in implementing the enhanced initiative for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). We have strongly supported strengthening the link between the IMF's Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility and countries' Poverty Reduction Strategies. We also welcome efforts to improve collaboration between the IMF and the World bank. We will press for further progress in all these areas. We will also continue to encourage the IMF to take greater account of the relationship between stabilisation, structural issues, poverty and growth, and to support broad debate within countries about the design and impact of their policies.

Mozambique

28. **Mr. Burgon:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in Mozambique. [132209]

Clare Short: Almost all those displaced following the severe floods in Mozambique earlier this year have now returned home. Reconstruction and rehabilitation works are under way. These include works on vital health and education buildings. Under Government guidelines houses are being rebuilt using more robust materials. Water and sanitation facilities are also being rehabilitated, and in some cases built where previously there were none.

Landmines have posed a significant humanitarian threat to the people of Mozambique in the past. Although the job of clearing them is far from over, large areas of land have been made safe. We are supporting demining in Zambezia, where most of the Province has now been declared safe from exploded ordnance and landmines.

Aid Administration (Charities)

29. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has received on administering aid through smaller charities; and if she will make a statement. [132210]

Clare Short: I receive many representations from a wide range of organisations in Britain, including small development charities.

All the work of my Department is focused on reducing global poverty. Civil society organisations in the UK and in the developing world have an important role to play. We have established a new Civil Society Challenge Fund—the CSCF—to provide finance to civil society groups, that provide support to poor people in asserting their rights and to promote innovation and reforms for sustainable development. The CSCF is open to any UK based non-profit group, organisation or network. My officials will shortly be discussing the operation of the new scheme with all applicants to date. Details of the CSCF are available in the Library of the House.

Debt Relief

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress in writing off the debts of the most impoverished countries in Africa. [132181]

Clare Short: Of 35 countries that could qualify for debt relief under the enhanced HIPC initiative, 30 are in Africa. Nine out of the 11 countries that have so far qualified are African. One, Uganda, has completed the HIPC process. As much as two-thirds of the debt owed by these countries could be written off.

A further 11 African countries could qualify for debt relief under HIPC by the end of the year, though some of these do not meet the standard HIPC requirements. The international community recently agreed to show flexibility in assessing countries' eligibility for relief, focusing on actions that are critical for poverty reduction.

After this group of countries it will be difficult to make substantial progress—nine of the 10 remaining African countries are affected by conflict.

TREASURY

Debt Relief

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much debt owed by poor countries has been cancelled *(a)* unilaterally by the UK and *(b)* as a result of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative. [132202]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The UK's policy of 100 per cent. debt forgiveness starts at decision point. The exact amount of debt forgiven unilaterally in addition to the reduction as part of the HIPC initiative depends on the exact settlement reached multilaterally when a country's debts are reduced to a sustainable level. At the start of this month, 10 countries had reached decision point and will see £245 million written off. Twenty countries are scheduled to reach decision point by the end of the year and will receive £610 million debt relief under the UK's policy. The first 10 countries to reach decision point will receive $21 billion in total debt relief, $16 billion in debt relief under the HIPC initiative and $5 billion from traditional debt relief measures.

In addition, the UK has pledged $316 million to the HIPC Trust Fund and has given $69 million to the IMF to finance its participation in the HIPC Initiative. It has made the second largest pledge of any country.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Public Trust Office

Mr. Colman: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what consultation and options for management of funds will take place with clients of the Public Trust Office prior to any change in such management. [134040]

Jane Kennedy: If a client wishes to use alternative fund managers to those offered by the Public Trust Office, they will be able to apply to the Court of Protection to do so. The Court will consider every application on its merits, bearing in mind the performance, charges and financial probity of the alternative fund manager proposed.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Visit (Portsmouth)

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to visit Portsmouth. [132215]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

GM Crops

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how growers of organic crops six kilometres or less from unpublicised genetically modified plantings can find out the location of such plantings in order to assess the threat to their organic status. [123078]

Ms Quin: Releases of genetically modified (GM) plants for research purposes under Part B of EU Directive 90/220 are advertised locally and placed on the public register of releases before sowing. The locations of these plantings are also published on the DETR website (www.environment.detr.gov.uk).

Plants with a Part C marketing consent under Directive 90/220 have undergone a detailed safety assessment and been approved for commercial release across the EU. The directive does not require the disclosure of plantings with Part C approval, but where they are part of the Farm Scale Evaluation (FSE) programme details are published on the DETR website, and where they are part of National List trials the locations have been made available at civil parish level as set out in the table.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 675W. Other trials of GM plants with a Part C consent—for example, experimental work carried out by the companies concerned—do not need to be notified to the Government. However, we understand that only four such trials have been undertaken this year, and that these have been small in scale. Three were co-located with other publicised trials, and all were conducted under the same guidelines for GM cropping as in the FSE trials, including the application of separation distances between the GM plants and equivalent non-GM plants.

The industry's agreement with the Government lays down that there will be no commercial growing of GM crops until the FSE trials have been completed and evaluated.

Locations of 2000 national list trials of GM maize with Part C consent

County	*Parish*
Oxfordshire	Stoke Talmage
Somerset	Brockley
Yorkshire	Bramham cum Oglethorpe
Cambridgeshire	Histon
Shropshire	Ercall Magna

Farmers (Internet Technology Take-up)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will set out, in regard to his reorganisation of his Department, the assumptions he has made for the uptake of internet technology among farmers; and what provision has been made for farmers unable to access the required technology. [134097]

Mr. Nick Brown: The creation of the new CAP Payments Agency (CAPPA) will transform the way in which farmers claim their CAP payments. I recognise that some farmers are concerned about the changes and the CAPPA business case makes the prudent assumption that only around 20 per cent. of farmers will be using electronic forms by 2004. I believe that this is achievable, and that many farmers will recognise the benefits of electronic form submission and will be keen to use them.

Encouraging farmers to submit their claims electronically is clearly important to the success of CAPPA. We will work very closely with them to help them reap the benefits which electronic service delivery offers. As a first step, the consultation exercise "Modernising Key Services" sought views on the best way of ensuring a smooth transition to the new arrangements, and we are currently analysing the response.

Departmental Restructuring

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will publish the reasons he selected his Department's regional service centres in *(a)* Worcester, *(b)* Cambridge, *(c)* Bristol, *(d)* Nottingham and *(e)* Crewe for closure; [134095]

(2) what assessment he has made of the result of his plans to reorganise his Department with special reference to the areas *(a)* east of Exeter and *(b)* south of Northallerton. [134096]

Mr. Nick Brown: I announced on 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 472–74W, the sites that will make up the new CAP Payments Agency (CAPPA). This decision was particularly difficult. All the existing

Intervention Board and MAFF Regional Service Centres were carefully considered as possible locations for the new Agency.

A detailed analysis of financial issues did not produce clear conclusions on which sites should be selected: in most cases, the choice of one site over another had a very limited impact on the overall funding for the programme. A number of non-financial criteria were therefore taken into account, specifically:

the potential impact of office closures on the local economy;

the local employment situation and the way that this affects our ability to recruit and retain staff; and

business continuity factors.

I am satisfied that the final decision on CAPPA sites offers the best balance between the structure of CAPPA, cost and maintaining business continuity during the transition period. CAPPA processing centres will handle claims from all parts of the country, not just their own local area.

At the same time as announcing these changes, I also announced my plans to strengthen MAFF's regional strategic and policy activities through greater integration with the Government Office for the Regions and the establishment of a largely regionally based service organisation for the delivery of rural development policies and programmes. MAFF will retain a presence in Worcester, Cambridge, Bristol, Nottingham and Crewe to handle work on the England Rural Development Programme, as well as maintaining its presence in the GO Regions which have CAPPA sites. I am convinced that strengthening MAFF's regional presence in this way will benefit agriculture and the wider rural economy.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Kuwait

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representation has been made by Her Majesty's Government to Iraq and to the United Nations regarding Kuwaiti and other third country nationals who have been missing since the invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi troops; and if he will make a statement. [134002]

Mr. Hain: HMA Kuwait, as the British representative on the Tripartite Commission which, under ICRC chairmanship, seeks to account for the whereabouts of the Kuwaiti missing, called on Iraq to return to the Tripartite Commission process when he attended a consultation meeting of Commission members in Geneva on 21 June. I also take this opportunity to urge Iraq once again to re-engage with this process and finally to tell the truth about the whereabouts of those who have tragically been missing for so many years.

EU Publications

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many copies of the booklet "A Glossary of Eurosceptic Beliefs: An Exposé of Misunderstanding" have been produced; and what is the target audience. [134193]

Mr. Vaz: This publication was produced by the European Commission, not the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I therefore refer the hon. Member to the office of the European Commission in London.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what was the *(a)* budget line and *(b)* cost of producing the booklet entitled "A Glossary of Eurosceptic Beliefs: An Exposé of Misunderstanding"; and if his Department was consulted thereon; [134194]

(2) if he will request the European Commission to publish a document of like format to the "Glossary of Eurosceptic Beliefs" assessing the arguments of European integrationists. [134185]

Mr. Vaz: We do not seek to influence the publications policy of the European Commission.

Private Sector Secondments

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the private sector companies from which secondments have been made to his Department since June 1997. [133872]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to the question raised by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) on 29 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 581W, and to my letter of 5 July to the hon. Member for Bath, placed in the Libraries of the House, which set out a full updated list.

Since my answer, there have been a further five secondments to the Department from the following private sector companies:

BP Amoco

British Airways

KPMG

PriceWaterhouseCoopers

Rolls-Royce plc.

Secondments and attachments are part of the Interchange Initiative which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between the Civil Service and other organisations. Before an Interchange can occur all parties must be satisfied that no conflict of interest arises.

Cyprus

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department is holding with Mr. Denktash on reasons for the arrest of newspaper editor Mr. Semer Levent in Northern Cyprus. [133815]

Mr. Vaz: We and key European partners have made it clear to the Turkish Cypriots at various levels that Mr. Levent's arrest, and any other measures which restrict journalists' freedom of speech, raises questions about their respect for human rights. It is encouraging that all those involved have now been released from custody. We and our EU partners will continue to monitor the situation.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if Sir David Hannay will hold discussions with Mr. Denktash on the arrests of trade union members in Northern Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [133816]

Mr. Vaz: As my hon. Friend will be aware, we monitor the situation in the north of Cyprus closely and we are not aware of any systematic harassment of trade union members. We understand that some trade union members were arrested in July but that these individuals were released shortly afterwards.

Immigration

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how long a person applying for entry clearance for settlement in *(a)* February, *(b)* March, *(c)* April, *(d)* May and *(e)* June can be expected to have to wait for an interview in each queue at each post in the Indian sub-continent; and what estimate he has made of the numbers of additional staff required in (i) Dhaka, (ii) Islamabad and (iii) New Delhi to bring waiting times down to the levels maintained at the British post in Colombo. [133845]

Mr. Vaz: The statistics for 2000 are as follows:

Waiting times in weeks on the last day of the month in 2000

Post/Queue	*February*	*March*	*April*	*May*	*June*
Bombay					
Q1	0	0	0	0	0
Q2	6	6	6	6	6
Q3	6	6	6	6	6
Q4	6	6	6	6	6
Calcutta[1]	0	0	0	2.9	0
Madras[1]	11	8	5	9	8
New Delhi					
Q1	0	0	0	0	0
Q2	8	8	8	10	12
Q3	8	8	8	10	12
Q4	8	8	8	10	12
Colombo[1]	8	9	7	11	10
Dhaka					
Q1	16	16	16	16	16
Q2	28	28	28	28	28
Q3	16	16	16	16	16
Q4	56	56	44	44	44
Islamabad					
Q1	8.5	9	10	6	5
Q2	30	26.5	26	23	20.5
Q3	41	35.5	33.5	33	29
Q4	46.5	42	40	39	36
Karachi[1]	9	9	7	5	3

[1] Calcutta, Colombo, Karachi and Madras operate a single settlement queue

Notes:
Queue 1—Right of abode cases and Dependant Relatives over 65;
Queue 2—Spouses and Children under 18;
Queue 3—Fiance(e)s and Other First Time Applicants;
Queue 4—Re-applicants.

To determine the numbers of staff required in Dhaka, Islamabad and New Delhi to bring waiting times to the level in Colombo would require further operational reviews to be carried out at each post. Additional permanent staff have already been provided for Islamabad and Dhaka. Further increases are proposed for those posts and for New Delhi. All posts benefit from additional temporary staff during the busy summer season. These actions have brought queues 1, 2 and 4 in Islamabad to within agreed target times.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will (1) list those areas where the negotiators of the Lomé Peace Accords requested advice from Her Majesty's Government; [134196]

(2) list those articles of the Lomé Peace Accords on which his Department contributed advice. [134192]

Mr. Hain: Representatives of HMG, along with the other international observers helping to facilitate the Lomé peace negotiations, were in close touch with the negotiators over all aspects of the draft agreement, in the interest of encouraging a successful conclusion. However the resulting agreement was a matter for the parties involved, not for HMG.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 19 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 186W, on Sierra Leone, if he will make a statement on the nature of the conflict between the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources and existing Sierra Leonese Government ministries, with reference to related action by Her Majesty's Government. [134198]

Mr. Hain: We understand that the respective roles and functions of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development, the Ministry of Mines, and the Government of Sierra Leone itself has yet to be defined.

This was a matter for the respective bodies to work out. Our own policy was—and remains—to support the objective of the Lomé Peace Agreement that the Government of Sierra Leone shall exercise full control over the exploitation of gold, diamonds and other natural resources for the benefit of all of the people of Sierra Leone.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone. [134262]

Mr. Hain: We strongly support the UN's effort to help bring peace and stability to Sierra Leone. We remain ready under a Memorandum signed with the UN in 1999 to deploy a rapid reaction force, of up to brigade size, based in the UK, in support of UN peacekeeping operations including that in Sierra Leone. Final decisions on deployment remain with the Government, but the speed and scale of the force's deployment in Freetown in May shows what is available. We are also meeting requests from the UN to fill key appointments in the UNAMSIL headquarters in Freetown, adding to the military observers already deployed.

Western Sahara

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the United Nations settlement plan for the western Sahara; and if he will make a statement. [134188]

Mr. Hain: We have given full support to UN efforts to achieve a just and durable peace in the western Sahara and continue to believe that a just solution depends on the Saharawi people having their say at the ballot box.

The UN has said that both parties to the dispute, Morocco and the Polisario Front, have been responsible for delays in implementing the UN Settlement Plan, and principally over who should be allowed to vote in a referendum on the future of the territory. The UN has concluded that these differences could prevent a referendum being held before 2002 or even beyond. There has only been limited progress on other key aspects to the plan, such as prisoners of war and refugee repatriation.

The Settlement Plan also lacks an enforcement mechanism. The UN Secretary-General has said that he does not expect one will be forthcoming. With this in mind, we believe that the Secretary-General was right to ask his Personal Envoy—James Baker—to explore the possibility of finding a mutually acceptable way forward. Mr. Baker has a broad mandate from the Security Council to look at all options. He has our full support. We provided him with two venues in London earlier this year to conduct high-level talks between the parties. We urge all sides to co-operate fully with his mission.

European Courts

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on increasing co-operation between the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights; and if he will make a statement. [134202]

Mr. Vaz: The Government are content that the current process of co-operation between the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights functions well. Any increase in co-operation is a matter for the courts themselves.

European Union

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the basic principles attached to EU membership, breach of which encourages EU sanctions, as discussed at Feira; and if he will make a statement. [134203]

Mr. Vaz: The principles on which the EU is founded are listed in Article 6(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). These are liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. A serious and persistent breach of these principles can lead to measures under Article 7 TEU.

The Intergovernmental Conference is not proposing any changes to these principles, but is discussing the introduction of an early warning mechanism in Article 7 to forestall any breach.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy on *(a)* the inter-institutional agreement on transparency in European Community institutions and *(b)* extending transparency beyond that agreement. [134205]

Mr. Vaz: The UK strongly supports improved openness in the Community institutions, and has been very active in promoting this. We supported the 1993 inter-institutional declaration on democracy, transparency and subsidiarity, and are pleased that many of the elements in it have been successfully implemented. For example, the Council now holds regular public debates as well as publishing records and explanations of its voting.

As for extending transparency beyond that agreement, a new regulation on public access to documents is currently being negotiated by the Council and the European Parliament. The UK is playing an active role and will continue to push for a regulation which allows the maximum public access to documents, while providing adequate protection for the most sensitive documents.

EU and NATO

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of progress made in setting up modalities for full consultation, co-operation and transparency between the EU and NATO. [134093]

Mr. Vaz: The Feira European Council proposed to NATO the establishment of four joint EU/NATO "ad-hoc working groups": to discuss the preparation of an EU-NATO Security Arrangement; to exchange information on the elaboration of capability goals; to establish modalities for enabling EU access to NATO assets and capabilities and to define permanent arrangements for EU/NATO consultation. Each of these groups has met and progress is being made on the issues they are addressing. The North Atlantic Council and the EU's interim Political and Security Committee have also met jointly to oversee the work of these groups.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress made by the EU in setting up consultation and co-operation links between the EU and *(a)* NATO's non-EU members, *(b)* other countries who are candidates for accession to the EU and *(c)* other prospective partners in EU-led crisis management. [134092]

Mr. Vaz: The Feira European Council established interim arrangements to ensure the necessary dialogue, consultation and co-operation on EU-led crisis management between the European Union and non-EU European NATO members and candidates for accession to the EU. Meetings of the EU's interim Political and Security Committee and the interim Military Body have since been held with the non-EU European NATO members and EU accession candidates.

The French Presidency of the EU is expected to make initial proposals for appropriate arrangements for consultation with other prospective partners at the Nice European Council. It also intends to propose permanent arrangements for consultation with the non-EU European NATO members and EU accession candidates.

Balkans

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his European counterparts on efforts to find a peaceful resolution of tensions between Serbia and Montenegro. [134094]

Mr. Vaz: I am in regular contact with my European counterparts on all aspects of the political situation in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Tensions have subsided

dramatically following the departure of Slobodan Milosevic. I am encouraged that President Kostunica of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and President Djukanovic of Montenegro appear willing to resolve remaining differences peacefully and democratically.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his *(a)* EU and *(b)* American counterparts regarding the developments in the southern Balkans. [134080]

Mr. Vaz: I am in regular and frequent contact with my European Union and US colleagues on all matters relating to the Balkans. The conclusions of the EU General Affairs Council on 9 October showed the common determination of EU member states to support fully the very positive changes in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the political and security situation in *(a)* Kosovo, *(b)* Serbia, *(c)* Montenegro, *(d)* Vojvodina and *(e)* Sandjak. [134087]

Mr. Vaz: The fall of the Milosevic regime has given considerable reason for optimism about the political future and prospects for peace and security in the Balkans. Preparations for municipal elections in Kosovo on 28 October are on track, following which municipal assemblies will be established. The security situation has significantly improved although ethnic violence remains a serious problem. President Kostunica has already begun a dialogue aimed at improving relations between Serbia and Montenegro. There was also widespread electoral support on 24 September for the new democratic forces in both Vojvodina and the Sandjak area of Serbia.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on the current security situation in Kosovska Mitrovica; [134086]

(2) what assessment he has made of the political and security situation in Mitrovica; and if he will make a statement. [134082]

Mr. Vaz: The political and security situation in Mitrovica remains tense. UNMIK and KFOR are taking steps to improve public order and to counter extremist activities. UNMIK is also trying to improve the quality of life for Serbs in northern Mitrovica. Our longer term aim is to promote ethnic reconciliation between the two communities. We hope the recent changes in Belgrade will improve the situation in Mitrovica, which has suffered in the past from interference by the Milosevic regime.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Kosovo Serbs in Northern Mitrovica have registered for the Kosovo autumn elections. [134083]

Mr. Vaz: Figures provided by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) suggest that to all intents and purposes, there has been virtually no registration by Kosovo Serbs in Northern Mitrovica.

This was due, in part at least, to intimidation by the former Milosevic regime. UNMIK are taking steps to ensure that despite being unable to vote, Serbs will be represented on the municipal councils.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures he has taken to ensure that the OSCE mission in Kosovo registers the displaced non-Albanians to allow them to vote in the forthcoming elections. [134088]

Mr. Vaz: Within Kosovo the UN/OSCE Joint Registration Task Force had registered approximately 1 million people before the official close of Registrations on 19 July 2000. To encourage registration the OSCE Mission in Kosovo mounted extensive public information campaigns and regular meetings with representatives of all ethnic groups. Out-of-Kosovo registration was contracted out to the Institute of Migration who have registered just under 40,000 people. Unfortunately as a result of Milosevic's deliberate policy of non-co-operation with the International Community those displaced persons resident in Serbia were not able to register.

Registration figures are not broken down on ethnic lines.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in establishing the Kosovo War and Ethnic Crimes Court. [134081]

Mr. Hain: The proposal for a Kosovo War and Ethnic Crimes Court is still under consideration within the UN system.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what actions have been taken by *(a)* UNMIK, *(b)* the EU, *(c)* the International Committee for the Red Cross and *(d)* the International Commissioner for Human Rights to secure the release of the Kosovo Albanian prisoners detained in Serbia. [134084]

Mr. Vaz: UNMIK, the EU, the International Committee for the Red Cross and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights worked hard on this issue while Milosevic was in power. The recent change of power in Belgrade brings new hope of a resolution. President Kostunica is aware of the importance the international community accords to this issue and we along with others will continue to raise it.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Kosovo Albanian prisoners are detained in Serbia. [134085]

Mr. Vaz: According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) some 942 detainees from Kosovo are currently held in prisons in Serbia.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Kosovo Serbs have registered for the Kosovo autumn elections. [134089]

Mr. Vaz: Although registration figures are not broken down on ethnic lines, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission in Kosovo, which is responsible for organising the forthcoming elections, estimate that under 1,000 Serbs have registered to vote.

This low figure was due, in part at least, to intimidation by the former Milosevic regime. UNMIK are taking steps to ensure that despite being unable to vote, Serbs will be represented on the municipal councils.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met Dr. Bernard Kouchner; and if he will make a statement on the progress of reconstruction in Kosovo. [134091]

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign Secretary last met Dr. Kouchner on 30 March this year.

UNMIK have made significant progress in their reconstruction efforts since June 1999. Schools have reopened with over a quarter of them repaired and refurbished and 90 per cent. of Kosovo children back in school. Extensive housing reconstruction is under way and will be stepped up.

UNMIK have begun work on a public reconstruction and investment programme for the period 2001 to 2003 which will set out Kosovo's needs for the medium term.

Missile Defence

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with other Government Departments on *(a)* the missile threat to Europe and *(b)* the US Government preparations to pursue national missile defence. [134075]

Mr. Vaz: The relevant Government Departments work very closely together on both these issues.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his European Union counterparts regarding the missile threat to Europe. [134078]

Mr. Vaz: The Government are in regular dialogue with its European partners on this and related issues. NATO is the main forum for such discussions.

Common Security and Defence Policy

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from the US Administration on further development of the European Union's common security and defence policy. [134076]

Mr. Vaz: President Clinton welcomed the outcome of the Feira European Council regarding the European Security and Defence Policy in a statement on 20 June 2000. Defence Secretary Cohen also took part in a discussion on this subject at the meeting of NATO Defence Ministers in Birmingham on 10 October 2000.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from Turkey and Norway regarding the European Union's common security and defence policy. [134077]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met the Foreign Minister of the Turkish Republic on 12 September 2000 and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister met the Prime Minister of Norway on 13 October 2000. The European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy was discussed on both occasions.

Common Foreign and Security Policy

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress he and his European counterparts have made in creating consultative bodies for the common foreign and security policy that are acceptable to the Turkish Government. [134079]

Mr. Vaz: Turkey is kept appraised of recent developments in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. For example the Foreign and Commonwealth Office briefs the applicants for EU membership, including Turkey, after every General Affairs Council and European Council. Furthermore, Turkey has played a full role in interim arrangements established at the Feira European Council, to ensure the necessary dialogue, consultation and co-operation on EU-led crisis management with non-EU European NATO members and applicants for EU membership.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on facilitating the sale of arms to Zimbabwe. [134090]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced a national arms embargo on Zimbabwe to the House on 12 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 493–94W. This remains in force.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Government Amendments

Mr. Rowe: To ask the President of the Council how many Government amendments were accepted in the House of Lords to Government bills in the present session. [134098]

Mrs. Beckett: 3,892 (as at close of business on Tuesday 24 October).

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 26 October 2000

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Business Relations

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many new regulations on business were introduced by his Department in the financial year 1999–2000. [134771]

Ms Hewitt: My Department was responsible for 172 regulations affecting business in this period. Of these, 135 had no cost impact on business and 18 reduced businesses' costs. Sixty-three of them were Orders licensing businesses as public telecommunications providers.

Virgin Group

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will establish an inquiry into the privatisation in 1988 of the Virgin Group and the subsequent re-sale in 1989 of a 25 per cent. stake in that company to the Pony Canyon Company. [134618]

Dr. Howells: If the hon. Member sends me any evidence in support of this request I will consider it.

Merger Regime

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for reforming the merger regime. [135684]

Mr. Byers: In August last year the Government published proposals for reforming the UK's system of merger regulation and invited interested parties to comment on them.

When I launched the consultation I set out key principles which a reformed regime should reflect. In particular, it needed to provide effective and proportionate control of mergers which had harmful effects; be clear, transparent, consistent and fair; and impose minimum burdens on those using it. I proposed two fundamental reforms to the current regime. First, the framework for decisions should be clarified, focusing it more clearly on competition; and secondly, ministerial involvement in merger decisions should be minimised. In addition, I put forward a number of more detailed proposals for reform covering issues such as the status of the independent competition authorities, exceptional interest cases and timetables.

We received 60 representations from a broad range of companies, competition lawyers, trade unions, business and consumer organisations, regulatory bodies and a number of individuals. There was a broad support for minimising ministerial involvement and moving towards a competition-based test. Respondents also provided useful views on other aspects of the regime.

I am publishing today the Government's response to this consultation, which summarises the views received and sets out proposals for the future.

In summary:

responsibility for making decisions in merger cases should be given to the independent competition authorities; the Secretary of State should only become involved in the small minority of cases which raise defined exceptional public interest issues;

decisions should be made by the competition authorities against a competition-based test rather than against the current public interest test;

the division of responsibility between the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) and the Competition Commission (CC) should remain unaltered: the OFT will conduct the first stage, preliminary investigation into a merger and the CC will carry out a second-stage, in-depth inquiry if merited;

the system of voluntary notification for all mergers, which business clearly values, should be retained;

wherever possible timetables for investigations should be tightened.

We intend to define national security in the legislation from the outset as an area raising issues of exceptional public interest. In addition, we intend to give the Secretary of State a reserve power to define further specific exceptional public interest criteria where ministerial involvement in the mergers process may be necessary, although there are no current plans to make any such orders. This power will be subject to the approval of Parliament.

There are a number of more detailed issues set out in the document, including the specific form of the competition test and of the qualifying thresholds, and alternative approaches to develop the Competition Commission's procedures for identifying remedies. The Government would welcome further views on aspects of these. While the principles underlying the reforms are clear, today's announcement represents a further stage in consultation, not the end of the process. We will continue to develop the detail of the proposals, consulting with interested parties where appropriate.

The Government intend to introduce legislation designed to implement the measures set out in the document as soon as parliamentary time permits.

However, in light of the broad support among consultation responses for the thrust of the reforms, I have been examining ways of making progress towards operating the current regime consistently with the principles underlying the reforms, so far as is possible within the existing framework. I am now, therefore, adopting a new policy in relation to the advice I receive from the Director General of Fair Trading.

First, I confirm I will continue to refer cases to the Competition Commission primarily on competition grounds.

But I wish to go further, in advance of legislation.

My policy from today will be to accept the advice I receive from the Director General of Fair Trading on whether or not to refer merger cases to the Competition Commission, save in exceptional circumstances.

I do not expect exceptional circumstances to arise often. It may be appropriate for me to intervene, for example, where a merger raises national security issues or where

there are other unusual circumstances, such as where there is a material change after the submission of the DGFT's advice, or where the advice of the DGFT conflicts with the views of sectoral regulators.

I think that it is right that the role of the Director General of Fair Trading should be emphasised in this way. This policy currently covers only my decisions following the advice of the DGFT on reference decisions (including undertakings in lieu). I intend to review in 12 months time the position in relation to my decisions following advice from the Competition Commission after a full inquiry into a referred merger.

Today's announcement reflects my view that the Director General is best placed to assess competition issues in individual cases. As previously, it will be for the Director General to decide on the process he thinks best serves him in the formulation of his advice. Departmental officials will continue to assist in this process where the Director General of Fair Trading considers this appropriate.

Lastly, I want to take what action I can to reduce the burdens of the current system on business. To this end I propose to exempt small firms from paying merger fees. I am publishing draft proposals for doing this today and seeking interested parties' views on them.

Coal Industry

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what grant money has been paid to the coal industry since his announcements offering £100 million to the industry. [134977]

Mrs. Liddell: On 27 July, I announced that the UK Government had formally applied to the European Commission for its approval to pay operating aid to United Kingdom coal producers over the period to July 2002. The European Commission is still considering our application, so no grant money has yet been paid to the coal industry under this scheme.

Nissan

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has obtained EU approval for Government funding to Nissan. [134979]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Notification of an RSA grant to Nissan to secure the Micra project has been made to the European Commission and a response is awaited.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what terms he offered Nissan £40 million of Government aid; and when he plans to pay Nissan such grant. [134976]

Mr. Alan Johnson: An offer of RSA has been made to Nissan in an effort to ensure the Micra project for its Sunderland plant. The offer was made subject to European Commission approval under the Motor Vehicle State Aid Framework.

If the Commission approves the offer and Nissan decide to locate the Micra project in Sunderland, payments will be made when agreed capital expenditure and job targets are met.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, if his Department will launch an inquiry to establish whether the New Millennium Experience Company has fulfilled its duties under section 221 of the Companies Act 1985 to maintain certain specific accounting records, with particular reference to maintaining a record of assets and liabilities. [134429]

Dr. Howells: As is known already, the National Audit Office are inquiring into the New Millennium Experience Company Limited. The findings of the inquiry are expected to be published in early November and will be considered by the Public Accounts Committee. Accordingly, it would be both premature and a wasteful duplication of resources for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to appoint inspectors at this stage.

Robert Maxwell

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) of 20 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 142W, regarding Robert Maxwell, when he expects to receive a report from the inspectors appointed on 8 June 1992 under the Companies Acts to investigate the affairs and membership of Mirror Group Newspapers plc; and what has been the cost to date of the inspection. [134879]

Dr. Howells: The inspectors have not completed their inquiries and so have not yet submitted their report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Although I am hopeful that these inquiries will be completed shortly, the inspectors are independent and I am unable to say when this is likely to be. The cost of the inspection to date (excluding Value Added Tax) is £7,946,344.

DEFENCE

Joint Force Harrier Programme

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact of the merging of the Royal Air Force's and Royal Navy's trade structures resulting from the Joint Force Harrier programme; and if he will make a statement. [134255]

Mr. Spellar: The Joint Force Harrier (JFH) initiative does not require the aircraft engineering trade structures of the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy to be merged. For the present, Royal Air Force Harrier squadrons and Royal Navy Sea Harrier squadrons will employ engineering personnel of their own services, organised within their existing trade groups and specialisations. It would not be practicable, nor is it desired, to introduce new trade structures for JFH that do not align with wider RAF and RN arrangements.

However, the desirability of converging aircraft engineering trade structures has been recognised, and the training and employment of aircraft engineering personnel is under review at many levels within MOD departments on a tri-service basis. The potential for JFH to act as a sounding board and catalyst for this is clear, especially

after collocation in 2003 when RAF and RN engineers will be working alongside each other at RAF Cottesmore and RAF Wittering.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost is to *(a)* the Royal Air Force and *(b)* the Royal Navy of the Joint Force Harrier programme; when the programme is expected to be completed; and if he will make a statement. [134249]

Mr. Spellar: The Joint Force Harrier programme is being managed by Royal Air Force Strike Command (STC), under the auspices of Air Officer Commanding No. 3 Group. Under current plans (as agreed by the Joint COS), the programme is due to be completed in the summer of 2003, when the FA2 Sea Harrier squadrons based at RNAS Yeovilton will have relocated to RAF Stations Cottesmore and Wittering. Work is already under way to prepare the two sites for the arrival and collocation of the Royal Naval elements. The present budget for the additional capital works (and other relocation-related costs) is approximately £11 million, the costs of which are being borne by RAF Strike Command.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact of the joint force Harrier programme on the operational capability and engineering efficiency of the RAF's GR7 and the Royal Navy's FA2 Harriers; and if he will make a statement. [134251]

Mr. Spellar: The advances made in Joint Force Harrier (JFH) operational capability have already been demonstrated on the world stage. In the first six months of its existence, No. 3 Group of RAF Strike Command which own JFH and, in particular, its embarked RAF Harrier GR7 and Navy Sea Harrier FA2 squadrons, have made major contributions to Operation Palliser (Sierra Leone) as well as the recent Mediterranean deployment by the aircraft carrier HMS Invincible. As an international means of power projection, an aircraft carrier with fully integrated JFH units embarked is a considerable national asset and one which has already proved its potent deterrent value. The benefits have also been significant in the supporting areas where a slim, but truly joint staff organisation allows for rapid planning and execution of integrated operations. This arrangement also benefits exercise planning and will lead to more integrated—and therefore considerably improved—use of training opportunities.

At station and squadron level, the engineering efficiency of JFH units will not be affected in the short term, as the units remain at their current air stations. In the longer term, direct engineering efficiencies are limited by the significant differences between the Harrier GR7 and the Sea Harrier FA2 aircraft and their systems. However, maximum use is being made of collocation in 2003 to develop integrated support facilities for RAF and RN aircraft, an example being a combined facility for the repair and test of Pegasus engines. In the longer term, convergence of trade structures is expected to deliver a more flexible and deplorable workforce. Within RAF Strike Command, the Joint Force Harrier Role Office now discharges a number of engineering functions that were previously split between a number of departments and commands. This Role Office is built as a lean, joint organisation and provides key support to joint force Harrier staffs and other departments.

For the future, JFH will take part in the development of new support concepts and technologies associated with the Future Carrier Borne Aircraft (FCBA). These are intended to deliver significant through-life savings compared to current Harrier and Sea Harrier aircraft by large reductions in the engineering effort required in service.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how the single service identities of the RAF's Harrier GR7 and the Royal Navy's Harrier FA2 are maintained within the joint force Harrier programme; and if he will make a statement. [134250]

Mr. Spellar: In the Joint Force Harrier (JFH), single service ethos and identity will continue to be fostered within the individual communities. In tandem, a joint force ethos is developing. Both RN and RAF JFH squadrons will wear the uniform and ranks of their parent service and will be commanded by officers from the relevant service. Each service element of the JFH remains under full single-service command, including terms and conditions of service, disciplinary matters, and individual career development. These arrangements are planned to continue up to, and beyond, the Future Carrier Borne Aircraft/ the future aircraft carrier (CVF) era. Higher Command initiatives, such as the Armed Forces Overarching Personnel Strategy underpin the implementation of JFH. The integration of RAF and RN personnel as 'one company' is a clearly stated objective, and HQ 3Gp of RAF Strike Command sponsors a number of Working Groups that address various subject-related topics. In particular, the CVS/JFH Integration Working Group receives comprehensive debriefings after JFH operational and exercise detachments; from these reports 'best practice' is identified and adopted (after full consultation has taken place with the relevant single-service authorities).

ARMYMAIL

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel are connected by the ARMYMAIL electronic mail system supplied by Bull Information Systems Ltd.; at what cost; and if he will make a statement. [133729]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The ARMYMAIL electronic mail system was renamed the Electronic Messaging Service (EMS) in response to the wider tri-Service Defence community it now serves. The purpose of EMS is to provide a managed electronic mail interconnection service between separate information system communities in the Ministry of Defence (MOD). Subscription to EMS is on a communities-by-communities basis, and hence the number of potential users of the Service is the total number of users within each of the connected communities. There is currently a total of almost 82,000 members of the subscribing communities with the Army, RAF and MOD civilian organisations, including Defence agencies. The total cost of the service, paid to Bull Information Systems Ltd., is approximately £2.1 million per annum, based on the current usage.

Budget Allocations

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of *(a)* the Royal Air Force's

annual budget is allocated to its Harrier GR7 and *(b)* the Royal Navy's budget is allocated to its Harrier FA2; and if he will make a statement. [134248]

Mr. Spellar: On 1 April, following the re-organisation of Royal Air Force Strike Command (STC), budgetary responsibility for both the RAF Harrier GR7 and the Navy Sea Harrier FA2 transferred to Joint Force Harrier (JFH) under the command of No. 3 Group at STC. The Group's resource budget for the operation of the Joint Harrier fleet for financial year 2000–01 is approximately £330 million, which equates to 8.2 per cent. of the RAF Strike Command budget. While this includes the majority of costs relating to the Harrier FA2, some minor support costs are continuing to be borne by the Royal Navy pending the collocation of the Joint Force Harrier fleet in the summer of 2003.

In addition, further costs relating to the Harrier fleet are accounted for elsewhere in the Department—for example, RAF Personnel and Training Command and the Defence Logistics Organisation (DLO), who are, respectively, responsible for the production of trained manpower and equipment support.

HMS Prince of Wales

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action he plans to take concerning the removal of two propellors from the wreck of HMS 'Prince of Wales'; and if he will make a statement. [134469]

Dr. Moonie: We are aware of reports that HMS Repulse has lost two of her port side propellers. The first reported missing in the 1970s. The second was reported missing in October 1999.

My Department would act on any clear evidence that criminal activities are taking place.

We are not aware of any reports that HMS Prince of Wales has lost propellers.

War Graves at Sea

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with other Governments about the protection of war graves at sea; and if he will make a statement. [134470]

Dr. Moonie: In conjunction with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my officials have been represented at UNESCO meetings to discuss the Draft Convention of the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage. The issue of war graves has been discussed.

My officials have periodic informal contact with officials from Embassies in London to discuss the war graves issue. Record of such contacts are not kept.

Official Residences

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will provide a breadown of *(a)* the annual running costs, including separate breakdowns for the maintenance, furniture and equipment costs, for each official service residence, *(b)* the subject matter of contracts of more than £5,000 for each residence and *(c)* the annual cost of domestic and household staff for each residence; and if he will identify the county in which each official service residence is situated and the rank of the officer in residence. [134431]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Building Costs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to renovate his Department's headquarters in Whitehall. [134433]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard) on 17 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 162–63W.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what action she is taking to improve security in magistrates courts. [134228]

Jane Kennedy: Responsibility for security in magistrates courts rests with the Magistrates Courts Committee. The Lord Chancellor's Department has supported the issue of guidance to Magistrates Courts Committees on preventing violence to staff, magistrates and courts users. Where bids are received the Magistrates Courts Committees paying authority to install security equipment in court buildings, the Department treats them as a high priority for capital funding allocations. The Department also has a programme for the installation of secure docks where a need has been identified.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he received the Government Actuary's report under section 36 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000; and when he will lay it before Parliament. [134263]

Mr. Rooker: The Government Actuary is currently finalising his report. It will be published when it is completed.

Family Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 878W, if he will publish his estimate of the number of people entitled to family credit in 1998–99. [134576]

Angela Eagle: Estimates of numbers entitled to Family Credit in 1998–99 will be published on 8 December 2000 in "Income related benefits—estimates of take-up", a copy of which will be available in the Library.

Child Support Scheme

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to improve delivery of the child support scheme. [135682]

Angela Eagle: The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 provides the legislative basis for a reformed, and more customer focused, child support scheme. We are today placing in the Libraries copies of our improvement plan, "Operational Vision—Reforming the Child Support Scheme", which sets out the way in which the new service is to be delivered. Additional copies for hon. Members are available from the Vote Office.

Fraud

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Bristol City Council [135681]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of Bristol City Council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report provides recommendations aimed at helping the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter-fraud activities.

BFI reports a lack of senior management accountability in Bristol City Council. Management information was found to be poor with no effective means of measuring and monitoring performance at a corporate level and the council was unable to reconcile information between different accounting systems. BFI states this led them to question the integrity of the data used to claim DSS subsidy.

Inspectors found serious deficiencies in the council's administration of benefits and efforts to counter fraud which require immediate attention. The report notes serious concerns about weaknesses in the assessment, control and payment of benefit. The BFI concluded that the council had no effective assurance that claims were calculated correctly from the outset.

The classification of overpayments and recovery of debts was considered to be poorly managed across sites with no specific policy for the recovery of Housing Benefit overpayments. The council could not provide details of debts recovered.

In the area of counter-fraud activities, the BFI raises concern about the limited resources being deployed and the general poor quality of investigations. Despite this, the council has had some success in prosecuting benefit cheats.

More positively, Inspectors found that Bristol City Council keeps the public informed about access to benefits and has a well designed claim form. A formal and structured training and development programme is operated for staff and implementation of the Verification Framework in 1999 had been well managed.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Nottingham City Council. [135678]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report in respect of Nottingham City Council was published on 5 October 2000, during parliamentary recess. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report provides recommendations aimed at helping the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as their respective counter-fraud activities.

Inspectors found the council's staff committed to battling against arrears of work and striving to overcome long-term problems associated with a shortfall in staff resources and deficiencies in management and control.

The report identifies some effective work in the benefits processing area, but also several areas of deficiency. The BFI considered the council needed to introduce a structured regime of checking to gain necessary management assurance about security, accuracy and quality in benefit administration. The report states that the council's management needs to be more actively involved and that security concerns and audit recommendations should be addressed promptly.

The BFI found counter-fraud work was particularly weak, despite a steer from council members in 1997 that there was support for effective action to be pursued against fraudsters. To address this, the BFI recommends a thorough review of all counter-fraud operations.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and has asked the council for their proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Burnley Borough Council. [135677]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report in respect of Burnley Borough Council was published on 5 October, during parliamentary recess. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report provides recommendations aimed at helping the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as their respective counter-fraud activities.

The BFI reports that, at the time of the inspection, the council was providing a poor service to claimants, particularly in the time taken to process many claims. The report identifies weaknesses in the council's application of the Verification Framework (VF) and a failure to ensure all appropriate references had been made to the Rent Officer.

The report notes that little action had been taken by the council to address potential problems associated with private landlord cases which make up a high proportion of the claims case load and represent one of the highest risk areas. BFI identified that the council needs to

introduce effective liaison arrangements with its local landlords and for relevant information to be collected so that risks can be assessed.

Inspectors report that the work of the counter-fraud section was not managed effectively and there was a need for the council to use its fraud database to analyse risk categories and prosecute offenders where appropriate.

During the inspection, the council was planning to clear arrears of work and recruit and train additional staff. The BFI considered work backlogs needed to be tackled as a matter of urgency. A reduction in delays for processing claims and tightening the application of the VF in the areas specified in the BFI report could, inspectors say, greatly improve the service provided to claimants, and, at the same time, tighten the gateway to benefits.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and has asked the council for their proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, when he expects to publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council. [135676]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report in respect of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council was published on 12 September 2000, during parliamentary recess. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report provides recommendations aimed at helping the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as their respective counter-fraud activities.

The BFI report found that Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council performed well in some areas and that staff were both helpful and committed to raising the standard of benefit delivery and counter-fraud work. However noticeable differences in performance and procedure were identified between the two sites of Neath and Port Talbot.

Inspectors considered that some good counter-fraud practices had been introduced, such as a prosecutions panel. However, the BFI found that the council did not make effective use of the statutory powers for inspectors given by the 1997 Fraud Act. As well as identifying a need to improve investigation techniques, the report notes a lack of performance targets for investigators.

Inspectors state overpayments recovery was a particularly weak area with no specific overpayment policy and no targets for staff. There was no management information collected which could have helped the council to prevent overpayments occurring. Finally, because classification of overpayments were poor and essential procedures are not followed, the BFI raised doubts about the validity of the council's subsidy claim.

More positively, inspectors found the council has elected member support for its counter-fraud efforts. It has recently introduced the Verification Framework, which will provide a minimum set of standards for ensuring verification checks are made on claims.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and has asked the council for their proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Westminster City Council [135680]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of Westminster City Council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report provides recommendations aimed at helping the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as their respective counter-fraud activities.

The BFI reports that the council has a strong client side team to manage its contracted out benefit administration and counter fraud work. However, the complex management framework and associated organisational arrangements has led to inefficiencies and delays in processes. The report notes that significant work will be required by the council before it can give an assurance that the right amount of benefit goes to the right person in every case.

Inspectors found levels of verification being applied to claims did not meet the minimum standards of the Verification Framework (VF) and recommend full implementation of the VF.

Inspectors considered the council's benefits claim form required enhancement so as to reduce the number of requests made to claimants for further information. The BFI also recommends formal liaison arrangements should be introduced with private sector landlords. Inspectors report there is potential for the council to make greater use of statutory powers for the recovery of overpayments from private landlords and for registering debts with the court.

The report notes the council's strong counter-fraud stance which is supported by elected members. BFI states performance in fraud investigations would be improved if the council set targets for investigations and monitored outcomes.

Inspectors noted a number of good practices and initiatives such as the council's work with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Region's Rough Sleepers Unit and work undertaken to improve liaison arrangements between the Benefit Service and the Housing Department.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for their proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the baseline figure is for the amount of fraud and error in income support and jobseeker's allowance against which the targets in the Comprehensive Spending Review will be measured in *(a)* cash terms and *(b)* as a proportion of the total expenditure on these benefits. [134582]

Mr. Rooker: The target in the Comprehensive Spending Review is to reduce the percentage of loss from fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance. The baseline figure as a proportion of total expenditure on these benefits is 9 per cent.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will announce the outcome of the annual review of the Cold Weather Payments scheme; and if he will make a statement. [135679]

Angela Eagle: Following advice from the Meteorological Office, the annual review of the Cold Weather Payments scheme has now been completed. Amending regulations were laid on 6 October 2000 and will come into force on 1 November, in time for the beginning of the winter period.

One of the weather stations used in the scheme last winter, Eskmeals, which is situated on the Cumbrian coast, is closing. It has therefore been replaced in the scheme by the weather stations at Walney Island, which is a little further south along the coast. There have also been some changes by Royal Mail to postcodes, which have been reflected in the amending regulations.

Cold Weather Payments are separate from, and in addition to, Winter Fuel Payments, which are paid to eligible people from age 60.

I have written to each of the hon. Members affected by the changes.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the effect of raising the level of the Minimum Income Guarantee to £90 on the number of pensioners receiving *(a)* Income Support, *(b)* Housing Benefit and *(c)* Council Tax Benefits assuming that the starting thresholds for the Housing Benefit were adjusted in line. [134595]

Mr. Bayley: The estimated effect of raising the level of the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) to £90 on successful new claims would be 65,000 Income Support/MIG claims, 10,000 Housing Benefit claims and 20,000 Council Tax Benefit claims—assuming that the thresholds for Housing Benefit were adjusted in line.

Job Grant

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the new Job Grant. [132609]

Angela Eagle: We are introducing a new initiative from April 2001, known as the Job Grant.

For the first time, cash help with the transition from welfare to work will be available to most longer term claimants of a range of benefits. Lone parents will continue to benefit from the Lone Parent Run-On, but other claimants of Income Support (IS), Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), Incapacity Benefit (IB), or Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA) who are 25 or over and have been on benefit for at least a year, and who are moving into full-time work which is expected to last for five weeks or more, will now get a flat rate non-taxable payment of £100. Jobseekers who are under 25 will continue to benefit from the intensive help offered by the New Deal for Young People.

The Job Grant will replace the Jobfinders Grant and Job Match payments. The new grant will be simpler, more universal and will have fewer conditions.

SERPS

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if his proposed preserved rights scheme for entitlement to inherited SERPS entitlement will cover all of those who were actively misled about the rules of the SERPS scheme whether or not they then made a decision in the light of that misinformation which was to their detriment. [134593]

Mr. Rooker: The scheme will provide redress for those people who received incorrect or incomplete information about SERPS inheritance, who relied on that information in deciding what, if any, arrangements to make to protect the financial position of their spouse or themselves, and who would or might have acted differently if they had received correct and complete information.

WALES

Teachers

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many full-time and part-time teachers are employed by each education authority in Wales. [134910]

Mr. Hanson: Since 1 July 1999, this has been a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

St. David's Day

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly concerning the recognition of St. David's Day as an official holiday in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [134191]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The First Minister has written to me asking whether the UK Government would consider making St. David's Day an additional bank holiday in Wales. I meet with my right hon. Friend on a regular basis when we discuss this and similar matters.

NHS

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many NHS registered dentists there are per head of the population in each constituency in Wales. [135240]

Mr. Hanson: Since 1 July 1999, this has been a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Lords-lieutenant

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 315W, regarding Lords-lieutenant, what expenditure was incurred by his Department in support of each Lord-lieutenant in the financial year 1999–2000. [134975]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Following the rectification of an accounting error, total expenditure in the financial year 1999–2000 has been revised downwards to £17,680.75. This includes stationery costs of £1,890.58, which cannot be apportioned between the eight lieutenancies.

Miscellaneous expenses paid to each Lord Lieutenant were as follows:

Clwyd—nil

Dyfed—£4,051.52

Gwent—£2,119.24

Gwynedd—£532.60

Mid Glamorgan—nil

Powys—£2,230.20

South Glamorgan-£6,856.61

West Glamorgan—nil.

HEALTH

NHS Treatment

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines he has given to the NHS as to the relevance of a patient's age to the quality of treatment provided by the NHS. [135013]

Mr. Hutton: The National Health Service Plan, announced in July, made it clear that all NHS patients should have access to high-quality services designed round their clinical needs.

Discrimination on the grounds of age within the NHS is completely unacceptable. The Plan made it clear that we will challenge and remove any arbitrary policies based on age.

The National Service Framework (NSF) for Older People, to be published later this year and introduced from April 2001, will help to ensure that ageism is not tolerated in the NHS. The NSF will for the first time set national standards and define service models for older people's health and social care.

Drugs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the 10 preparations most prescribed by National Health Service general practitioners during the last year for which figures are available, stating, in each case, *(a)* the average cost during that year of the ingredients in each preparation dispensed and *(b)* the total number of prescriptions issued during the year. [134623]

Mr. Denham: The table gives details of the number of items and net ingredient cost for the top 10 preparations (in terms of items) dispensed in the community. The majority of these will have been prescribed by general practitioners.

Top 10 preparations in terms of prescription items dispensed in the community in 1999—England

Drug name	*Prescription Items (Thousand)*	*Net ingredient Cost (£000)*	*Cost per item (£)*
Aspirin Disper_Tab 75mg	10,848.3	3,640.4	0.34
Salbutamol_Inha 100mcg (200D)	8,527.9	25,334.9	2.97
Co-Proxamol_Tab 32.5mg/325mg	8,486.7	13,517.6	1.59
Bendrofluazide_Tab 2.5mg	7,158.8	9,008.2	1.26
Amoxycillin_Cap 250mg	6,181.7	9,906.6	1.60
Paracet_Tab 500mg	5,958.9	3,581.4	0.60
Frusemide_Tab 40mg	5,706.3	16,452.5	2.88
Atenolol_Tab 50mg	5,110.4	11,574.4	2.26
Lactulose_Soln 3.1g-3.7g/5ml	4,260.8	11,607.0	2.72
Losec_Cap E/C 20mg	3,903.2	156,654.3	40.13
Total	66,143.0	261,277.3	3.95

Notes:

1. The prescription information is from the Prescription Cost Analysis (PCA) system and is based on a full analysis of all prescriptions dispensed in the community, ie by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered in England. Also included are prescriptions written in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man but dispensed in England. The data do not cover drugs dispensed in hospital or private prescriptions.
2. The net ingredient cost (NIC) is the basic cost of a drug. This cost does not take account of discounts, dispensing costs, fees or prescription charges income.
3. Most of these items were prescribed by general practitioners; the main exception being Amoxycillin which dentists prescribed almost 1 million items.

Foreign National Patients

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking *(a)* to discover the extent and *(b)* to diminish misuse of the National Health Service by unauthorised foreign national patients. [134291]

Ms Stuart: Access to National Health Service hospital treatment is based on residence in the United Kingdom, not nationality. All patients should be asked as part of routine admission procedures about their normal place of residence and patients who are identified as not ordinarily resident in the UK should be further interviewed to establish if charges are appropriate. The relevant legislation is The National Health Service (Charges to Overseas Visitors) Regulations 1989.

Work is currently under way to review the charging regulations and guidance. This will include consideration of potential abuse of the system.

Aricept

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the research by the University of Southampton into the clinical effectiveness of Aricept. [134674]

Mr. Denham: Evidence relating to the clinical and cost effectiveness of Aricept is being considered by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. They are currently consulting on their provisional conclusions ("Provisional Appraisal Determination") which are confidential to the parties involved. Their final conclusions ("Final Appraisal Determination") are expected in December 2000.

Correspondence

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what targets he sets for the speed of ministerial replies to correspondence from hon. Members; and to what extent his Department has met those targets. [134589]

Ms Stuart: The Department has a Service First target set by the Cabinet Office of replying to all correspondence within 20 working days. There is no provision for fast tracking replies to correspondence to hon. Members.

Social Services (Worcestershire)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if supplementary credit approvals granted to the Social Services Department of Worcestershire County Council in earlier financial years which remain unused can be applied to reduce the projected overspend of this department. [134477]

Mr. Hutton: The supplementary credit approvals issued to Worcestershire County Council by the Department have been for capital projects related to mental health services and cannot be used to reduce projected overspends by its social services department.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Gift Shops Rulers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, for what reason the House of Commons gift shops sell rulers that are not marked in imperial measurements; and if he will ensure that such rulers are stocked. [134201]

Mr. Kirkwood: This is a matter for the Director of Catering Services. I shall ask her to write to the hon. Member.

SCOTLAND

Lord-lieutenants

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 17 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 58W, on lord-lieutenants, what expenditure was incurred by his Department in support of each lord-lieutenant in the financial year 1999–2000. [134857]

Dr. Reid: Legislative responsibility for lieutenancy matters is reserved. However, lord-lieutenants may claim reimbursement of expenses from the Secretary of Commissions for Scotland. I understand from the Scottish Executive that the expenditure incurred on each lord-lieutenant's expenses in the financial year 1999–2000 was as follows:

Lieutenancy	*Expenses (£)*
Aberdeenshire	4,359
Angus	—
Argyll and Bute	1,153
Ayrshire and Arran	2,545
Banffshire	1,597
Berwickshire	492
Caithness	1,664
Clackmannan	—
Dumfries	—
Dunbartonshire	2,779
East Lothian	347
Fife	1,277
Inverness	911
Kincardineshire	421
Lanarkshire	49
Midlothian	450
Moray	2,125
Nairn	—
Orkney	265
Perth and Kinross	—
Renfrewshire	788
Ross and Cromarty	—
Roxburgh, Ettrick and Lauderdale	407
Shetland	1,745
Stewartry of Kirkcudbright	775
Stirling and Falkirk	310
Sutherland	698
Tweeddale	45
Western Isles	2,186
West Lothian	—
Wigtown	553

The ex-officio lord-lieutenants (Lord Provosts) of the four cities do not claim expenses.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Stakeholder Pensions

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to offer stakeholder pensions to *(a)* new and *(b)* existing local government staff. [134371]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There are no plans at present to offer stakeholder pensions for new or existing local government staff who are subject to the Local Government Pension Scheme. The scheme contains no restrictions on access and will not have to provide a stakeholder pension arrangement for its employees. The legal obligation of local authority employers to provide stakeholder pensions for employees not subject to the Local Government Pension Scheme will be a matter for them to consider under the provisions of the Stakeholder Pensions Regulations, which came into force earlier this month.

Local Authority Housing

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to enable local authorities to improve the regulation of houses in multiple occupation. [134729]

Mr. Mullin: We consulted last year on proposals for compulsory licensing of houses in multiple occupation in England, and there was a parallel consultation in Wales. We will introduce primary legislation for England and Wales when parliamentary time allows. In Wales, secondary legislation and detailed arrangements are matters for the National Assembly.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he has received concerning the value of the Dome site *(a)* with the Dome in place and *(b)* with the Dome removed. [134486]

Ms Armstrong: A pre-sale valuation of the Dome site has been undertaken in the context of the competition to identify a use for the Dome when the Millennium Experience finishes. The Government estimate of the financial value of the site is commercially confidential while the process to secure a buyer continues.

World Athletics Championships

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the transport improvements necessary to enable Picketts Lock to host the World Athletic Championships in 2005. [134834]

Mr. Hill: None. It is for the project partners to commission the appropriate assessment.

Thrombosis

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what data he collates on the numbers of air passengers developing thrombosis on long distance and short distance flights. [134421]

Mr. Mullin: The data are not collated centrally. Such data would be difficult to obtain as any passenger developing thrombosis is usually likely to do so a number of days or weeks after the flight has taken place.

Sewage

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment Transport and the Regions how much sewage was discharged into the sea in coastal areas in the last two years for which figures are available; and what percentage of this was treated. [134215]

Mr. Mullin: Information is not available in the format requested. Data collated by the water industry shows that sewage discharges to English and Welsh coastal waters in 1998 were approximately 6 million population equivalent. ("Population equivalent" is a way of combining household and industrial discharges to sewers into a single figure, where industrial discharges are given an equivalence in their polluting potential to domestic sewage). The percentage receiving "secondary-level" or better treatment was 76 per cent. We have put in place the investment programmes to ensure that all discharges from sewage treatment works with a load of above 2,000 population equivalent will receive secondary treatment by 2005.

China Visit

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the purpose was of his recent visit to China; which staff accompanied him on the visit; what the cost was to the public purse of the visit; and what discussions he held with representatives of the Government of China on environmental or transport matters during his visit. [134631]

Mr. Prescott: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) on 25 October 2000, *Official Report,* column 128W. I was accompanied by four officials from my Department, one Special Adviser and one official from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. My costs for the trip were approximately £6,550.

South Downs National Park

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment Transport and the Regions what procedure he is following for the process of creating a National Park for the South Downs; and what the approximate timetable is. [134848]

Mr. Meacher: The Countryside Agency is responsible for designating National Parks and is in the process of considering a designation in the South Downs. The draft timetable provided by the Agency indicates that detailed local consultation on a possible boundary and administrative arrangements will continue until spring 2002, at which time the Agency proposes to deliver a designation order to the Secretary of State along with recommendations on administrative arrangements. The Secretary of State's role is to consider the designation order along with any representations received. In deciding whether to confirm the order, with or without modifications, the Secretary of State will consider any objections and, if necessary, call a public inquiry.

Powershift

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision has been made for future funding of Powershift grants for energy efficiency in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* Scotland. [134629]

Mr. Meacher: As announced in the Transport 10-Year Plan, the Government are committed to continuing and strengthening cleaner vehicle initiatives such as the Powershift programme. My Department will announce future funding arrangements for the Powershift programme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland later this year. The budget for Powershift in Scotland has been devolved to the Scottish Executive and an announcement about Powershift funding in Scotland will be made by the Scottish Executive later this year.

Rail Investment

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to take an equity stake in Railtrack plc in return for any grant received by the company. [134418]

Mr. Hill: Our plans for rail investment were set out in the 10-Year Plan for Transport, and will be further illuminated by the shadow Strategic Rail Authority's forthcoming strategic plan.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if Railtrack has invited the Government to take an equity stake in the company as a way of generating additional funds for investment; and if he will make a statement. [135079]

Mr. Hill: In the context of developing our Ten-Year Plan for Transport, the Government had a number of discussions with Railtrack and others about ways of increasing investment in the railway. Our plans for rail investment were set out in the Ten-Year Plan for Transport and will be further illuminated by the shadow Strategic Rail Authority's forthcoming strategic plan.

Local Government

Valerie Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish guidance on new council constitutions under part II of the Local Government Act 2000; and if he will make a statement. [135582]

Ms Armstrong: I have today commenced the duties on local authorities under Part II of the Local Government Act 2000 to consult on and draw up proposals for new constitutions.

I have today published guidance on new council constitutions for English local authorities and associated statutory directions, together with guidelines on the consultation process. I have placed copies of these documents in the Library of the House.

I have also today laid before the House copies of the following regulations:

Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000;

Local Authorities (Arrangements for the Discharge of Functions) (England) Regulations 2000;

Local Authorities (Referendums) (Petitions and Directions) (England) Regulations 2000; and

Local Authorities (Proposals for Alternative Arrangements) (England) Regulations 2000.

This is an exciting time of change for councils as they start to consult local communities on their new constitutions which will lead to greater efficiency, transparency and accountability.

In many areas councils have already begun consulting local people and experimenting with a form of new arrangements. The guidance will help councils build on what has already been achieved.

I expect the consultation to be meaningful and wide-ranging and to engage local people in discussions about the full range of options for change, including the chance to vote for a directly elected mayor if they want one. That is why today I am also publishing guidelines on consultation which offer practical help to councils.

The framework is now in place for councils to begin the formal process of consulting local people and drawing up proposals for their new constitution. It is now for councils to ask their communities how they want to be governed. Where people want a directly elected mayor, they will be able to have one.

Regional Government

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in implementing the Performance and Innovation Unit's report "Reaching Out: The Role of Central Government at Regional and Local Level". [135645]

Mr. Prescott: "Reaching Out" was published in February 2000. The Government accepted all of its 81 conclusions.

A key conclusion was that there should be new co-ordination arrangements. The Regional Co-ordination Unit (RCU) was established in April. In line with the report's recommendation, the RCU is an inter-departmental unit based in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. It reports to me, with day-to-day direction from my noble and learned Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office, Lord Falconer of Thoroton.

The Unit has prepared an action plan identifying the key areas in which we need a new approach to developing and implementing Government policy with regional implications. The plan will be published on Friday 27 October and copies will be placed in the Libraries of the House. The plan will also be published on the website, together with a summary of progress on implementing the 81 detailed conclusions of the PIU report. The website reference is www.government-offices.gov.uk.

Biological Diversity

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress was made at the last meeting of the conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. [135685]

Mr. Meacher: The Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity met for the fifth time in Nairobi in May. Parliamentary business prevented my attendance, but the United Kingdom fielded a strong delegation who played a key part, including by helping to agree a challenging programme of action on a range of issues. This is vital if we are to succeed in our aim of safeguarding the world's biodiversity, and the Government will play its full part, together with a wide range of other stakeholders and our partners in other countries, in putting these necessarily ambitious plans into practice.

Sixty-eight Parties to the Convention, including the UK, signed the Biosafety Protocol and a work plan was agreed for the first session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Protocol, which meets in Montpellier in December. UK chaired negotiations on the operations of the Convention led to agreement on a comprehensive package of reform to improve its effectiveness, including preparation of a strategic plan for adoption at the next COP, to be held in April 2002 in the Netherlands. An administrative budget of $18.64 million was agreed for 2001–02: the UK's contribution for the biennium will

be $0.911 million, an increase of 15.3 per cent. on 1999–2000, reflecting increased activity under the Convention.

A four year cycle was adopted for Parties' national reports, to include an across the board assessment of implementation using a standard format which should facilitate global stocktaking. Optional biannual reports on priority issues were also invited: for COP6 these will cover forest biodiversity, alien species and benefit-sharing.

Four ad hoc technical groups were set up, on marine and coastal biodiversity (2), drylands and forests. On inland water biodiversity, co-operation with the Ramsar Convention was encouraged. The COP decided to integrate fully the issue of coral bleaching into the marine and coastal biodiversity work programme which, along with the programme of work on forest biodiversity, envisages co-operation with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Work programmes on dryland and agricultural biodiversity were also adopted, as was one on the role of indigenous and local knowledge, with due emphasis on the participation of the holders of such knowledge.

An expert panel will be re-convened on access to genetic resources and benefit-sharing, and its findings will be considered by an open ended working group. This will draft guidelines for legislation and contracts for the exchange of genetic material and the means to protect traditional knowledge. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) were invited to explore further the relationship between the Agreement on Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) and the Convention.

The 'ecosystem approach', which is intended to underpin the Convention's work, was elaborated and enshrined in 12 guiding principles for use by Parties. Further work was initiated to improve indicators of biodiversity and programmes for monitoring and assessment, with an increased emphasis on work at the national and regional levels. An international co-ordination mechanism for the Global Taxonomy Initiative was established, along with supporting pilot projects. COP also called for further work on the case for the April 2000 Gran Canaria Declaration, which urged development of a global strategy to conserve plant biodiversity.

The COP agreed further development of the clearing house mechanism, designed to share information on activity under the Convention, in particular by building the capacity of developing countries to participate. A global initiative on education and public awareness was endorsed, and action encouraged at national level. Discussions on environmental impact assessment promoted the sharing of good practice; further work was foreseen on liability and redress; and a programme of work was established on incentive measures.

Among the recommendations endorsed by the COP on the sustainable use of biodiversity were the identification of indicators and incentive measures for use by relevant sectors. The tourism industry was encouraged to work with all stakeholders to develop sustainable tourism, and countries were urged to apply interim principles for the control of alien species. Satisfactory decisions on financial resources and mechanisms reflect the improving relationship between the Parties and the Global Environment Facility.

Full decisions from the meeting are available on the Convention's website at www.biodiv.org.

Environmental Reviews

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the forthcoming reviews of Environmental Campaign Ltd and the Environmental Action Fund. [135686]

Mr. Meacher: As part of the Government's programme of regular five-yearly financial, management and policy reviews of non-departmental public bodies and bodies similar to them, my Department has initiated a thorough review of Encams, the umbrella body through which we fund the Tidy Britain Group and Going for Green. The review will consider the case for continuing DETR funding of Encams' work programme in England, and whether Encams is the most appropriate body to carry out the functions funded by DETR. If appropriate it will then consider what changes may be necessary to the current strategic and financial relationship between the Department and Encams, to improve the value for money of any future funding. The review will be carried out by my Department's In House Policy Consultancy, which will consult widely with those organisations having an interest in Encams' activities.

We have also set in hand a review of the Environmental Action Fund (EAF) which will consider the effectiveness with which the £4 million per year of the EAF is spent on promoting sustainable living in England, examine the aims, terms, conditions and administration of these financial resources and, if appropriate, make recommendations for change to make sure that these resources are targeted most effectively. The review will be carried out by Quadrangle Consulting, who will consult widely with organisations having an interest in the work of the Fund.

I aim to ensure that any uncertainty caused by these reviews is kept to a minimum and I have asked both the In House Policy Consultancy and the EAF review team to report early in 2001.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Television Licence Fees

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will announce the television licence fees that will come into force next year; and if he will make a statement. [135776]

Janet Anderson: On 21 February this year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced the Government's conclusions on the recommendations of the independent review panel on the future funding of the BBC. In addition to a range of measures designed to improve BBC efficiency and accountability, the Government introduced a new funding formula which provides for changes in the licence fee of RPI plus 1.5 per cent. for each year from 2000–01 to 2006–07.

This formula will enable the BBC to provide a strong and distinctive schedule of benchmark quality programmes and remain at the forefront of the development of digital broadcasting services.

Application of the RPI figure of 3.3 per cent. for the year to September 2000, plus 1.5 per cent., to the current unrounded licence fees produces new rounded totals of £109.00 for a colour licence and £36.50 for a black-and-white licence. The new licence fees will come into force on 1 April 2001. The necessary regulations to bring these fees into force will be laid before the House in due course.

Historic Aircraft

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the Heritage Lottery Fund's terms of reference cover the making of grants to support the restoration, including to flying condition, of historic aircraft; and if he will make a statement. [134336]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Heritage Lottery Fund can support a wide variety of projects relating to aviation heritage, including the restoration of historic aircraft. The Trustees are willing to consider projects involving the long-term conservation, housing and interpretation of important aircraft. However, they do not expect to fund projects which restore aircraft to flying condition, given the risk of accident.

Arts Sponsorship

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to encourage increased commercial sponsorship of the arts. [134368]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Latest figures show that annual business support for the arts now stands at over £141 million—an impressive figure. My Department and the Arts Council of England are working closely with Arts and Business to increase that figure to £167 million by March 2002. We are actively promoting Arts and Business's New Partners programme, which will encourage businesses to develop closer, deeper and longer-term relationships with arts organisations. We are also providing funding for a new Arts and Business Information Unit, which will commission research to prove that such relationships can be of mutual benefit.

Regional Theatres

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the current deficit is of regional theatres in receipt of public funds; and if he will make a statement. [134597]

Mr. Chris Smith: The latest figure available from the Arts Council of England to the end of March 1999 is £4.4 million. I understand figures to March 2000 have been collected and will be available soon.

Communications White Paper

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects to publish the Communications White Paper. [134484]

Janet Anderson: The Communications White Paper will be published later this year. The White Paper will set out proposals for the reform of broadcasting and telecommunications legislation.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his policy is on the designation of the Millennium Dome as a listed building. [134620]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The general rule when looking at buildings for listing, is that those less than 10 years old are not listed. There is no reason for us to adopt a different policy for the Millennium Dome.

Television News Scheduling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the scheduling of news programmes on BBC1 and ITV. [134617]

Janet Anderson: It is not the role of Government to intervene in detailed issues of programme content and scheduling. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has, however, expressed his misgivings about the rescheduling of evening news services. Television is a vital source of information in our democratic society and it is important that the overall audience for television news and the quality of the service provided is not diminished.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the BBC regarding the scheduling of the BBC One evening news; and if he will make a statement. [134605]

Janet Anderson: When my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met the Chairman and Director-General of the BBC on 6 October to discuss a range of topics, he expressed misgivings about the BBC's decision to reschedule its evening news.

Disability Discrimination

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to discourage disability discrimination in connection with practitioners and performers in the arts. [134217]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I am committed to ensuring that all DCMS policies are fully inclusive. I have met Equity, the Actors' Union, on a number of occasions and have asked them to bring to my attention any cases of alleged discrimination. I also meet regularly the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking who is responsible for Disabled People, to discuss issues of mutual concern. I recently hosted a DCMS conference to discuss with representatives in the arts and leisure industries the impact of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 between now and 2004. My Department will shortly publish its social inclusion strategy for the arts, which will include specific policies for addressing the needs of disabled people.

British Museum

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he had with

(a) the Head of English Heritage and *(b)* others about the stone used on the South Portico of the British Museum. [134608]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The stone used in the South Portico of the British Museum's Great Court is a matter for the trustees of the British Museum, for English Heritage, for the Heritage Lottery Fund and for the London Borough of Camden, and not for me. My right hon. Friend and I have been kept informed and my right hon. Friend was shown the site earlier this year with representatives from the British Museum, English Heritage and the London Borough of Camden.

Regional Television News

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the provision of regional television news programmes. [134479]

Janet Anderson: The BBC is required, under its Charter and Agreement, to provide regional news and ITV licensees are required under the terms of their licences, to include in their regional programmes, minimum amounts of news of particular interest to viewers in their region. The BBC Governors give their assessment of the BBC's performance and compliance with its various obligations in their annual report and the Independent Television Commission gives its assessment of the extent to which the ITV licensees have complied with their licence requirements in the Commission's annual report.

Adult X Channel

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he intends to issue a proscription order against the Adult X Channel, as recommended by the Independent Television Commission. [134616]

Janet Anderson: The proscription of the Adult X Channel is a matter on which we are currently carrying out necessary consultations.

Spending Data (Visitors)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how his Department calculates average spending by visitors to *(a)* England, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Wales and *(d)* Northern Ireland. [134478]

Janet Anderson: My Department calculates the average spending by visitors to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland using statistical data provided by the UK tourism survey and the International Passenger Survey. Figures for the last full year for which information is available are as shown.

Average spending by visitors 1999

	Overseas residents			*UK residents*		
	Visits to the UK (Thousand)	*Spending (£ million)*	*Average spend per visit (£)*	*Visits within the UK (Thousand)*	*Spending (£ million)*	*Average spend per visit (£)*
United Kingdom	25,394	12,370	487	145.9	15,925	109
England	21,506	11,030	513	123.3	12,915	105
Scotland	1,856	817	440	10.5	1,665	158
Wales	1,010	269	267	10.9	1,135	104
Northern Ireland	294	109	370	1.2	210	175

Source:
The International Passenger Survey and The UK Tourist Key: Key Trends 1990–99

The IPS interviews a random sample of passengers as they enter or leave the UK by the principal air, sea and tunnel routes. The UKTS is based on interviews with a random sample of UK adult residents for every survey. The results from the interviews are weighed, taking into account of a number of factors, to produce national estimates. The national estimates are then used to calculate average spend per tourist trip.

BBC1 Evening News

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he intends to hold a six-month review of the performance of BBC1 evening news programmes in order to ensure compliance with the Royal Charter and Agreement; and if he will make a statement; [134622]

(2) if he has received a commitment from the BBC Board of Governors that they will review the performance of the BBC1 evening news bulletins following recent changes to its schedule. [134624]

Janet Anderson: It is not for the Government to review the performance of the BBC 10 o'clock news and we have not asked for or received a commitment from the Board of Governors that they will do so. The Governors are, however, committed to reviewing annually all of the BBC's public services against the criteria published in this year's Annual Report and Accounts. This will include the whole of the new BBC1 schedule. The results of these reviews will be published in next year's Annual Reports and Accounts.

Regional Orchestras

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the current deficit is of regional orchestras in receipt of public funds; and if he will make a statement. [134598]

Mr. Chris Smith: The projected figure for the nine orchestras for 1999–2000, quoted by ACE at the launch of its orchestral review last year, was £9,546,525. I understand actual figures to March 2000 have been collected and will be available soon.

Royal Opera House

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what revisions have been made to the budget of the Royal Opera House in the last six months; and if he will make a statement. [134489]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The budget of the Royal Opera House is a matter for the Board and Management of the House. I understand, however, that there have been no revisions to the budget in the last six months.

The Royal Opera House companies continue to attract a large and varied audience for their work. The House achieved over 90 per cent. capacity for performances of opera and ballet in the main auditorium in the first season after re-opening, and ticket prices have been reduced in many areas. A broad and innovative programme of education work has involved over 100,000 school children, as well as young people and adults from all backgrounds. I applaud the artists, board and management of the House for their commitment to producing excellent work for the widest possible audience.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Criminal Justice Review

Mr. McWalter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the outcome of the consultation on the report of the Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland. [135507]

Mr. Mandelson: The report of the Review of the Criminal Justice System was published in March, taking forward an important element of the Good Friday Agreement. The Review undertook a fundamental examination of the justice system in Northern Ireland, and the report cogently addresses a wide range of issues, backed up with extensive research. It emphasises the centrality of human rights, the need to safeguard and entrench the legal system's independence, and the importance of joined-up delivery and enhanced co-operation between the justice agencies and the wider community.

I welcomed the report and initiated a consultation process on its recommendations. The period of consultation ended on 29 September, and I am grateful to all those who submitted their views.

Overall, the consultation elicited a wide and positive range of responses. Inevitably with such a comprehensive report reservations on some of the proposals have been expressed, and we will wish to consider further the particular recommendations on which comments have been made. But there has been a wide measure of agreement on the overall shape of the proposed reforms, and a consensus among most respondents that the report represents the broad way forward.

The Government fully endorse the general approach taken in the report. Informed by the consultation exercise, we have now put in hand the detailed work needed to prepare legislation and an implementation plan. As the Prime Minister has said, these will both be published next April.

The report envisages that responsibility for the justice system should be transferred to the Assembly. The Government intend and are willing to devolve responsibility for policing and justice functions, as set out in the Good Friday Agreement. We need first to pave the way by completing the implementation of the policing reforms and giving practical effect to the decisions made on the Criminal Justice Review. Thereafter, devolution will follow as soon as practicable.

I will make a further statement in due course as the detailed work progresses.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Election of Speaker

Mr. Baker: To ask the President of the Council if she will bring forward proposals to change the method of election of Speakers. [134662]

Mrs. Beckett: This is a matter which falls within the remit of either the Procedure Committee or the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, or perhaps both. If such a Committee or Committees comes forward with proposals, they can then be put before the House.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Appointments Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council if the minutes of meetings of the Appointments Commission are to be made public. [133716]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that the Commission does not plan to make its minutes public since much of its work will consist of discussion of individuals. There is already a considerable amount of material about the Commission's working methods on its website www.houseoflordsappointmentscommission.gov.uk.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

General Fisheries Commission

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his policy towards the establishment of a general fisheries commission for the Mediterranean; if Her Majesty's Government will be represented; if the Government of Gibraltar will be represented; what voting arrangements will apply; what costs are involved; what manner of external donations towards running costs are permitted; and what is the nature of European Commission involvement. [134207]

Mr. Morley: The Government support the establishment of appropriate Regional Fisheries Organisations (RFOs) and encourages their application of the principles in the United Nations Fisheries Agreement.

Although the UK has no fishing interests in the Mediterranean it will be involved in the usual way in the preparation and co-ordination of an EU position in relation to the activities of the General Fisheries

Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM). As with other RFOs, it will then be for the Commission to negotiate on behalf of the EU.

Gibraltar is not represented in the GFCM as it does not have a domestic fleet which would be affected by the work of the Commission which concerns stocks in international waters in the Mediterranean.

Each member of the GFCM has one vote. The EU Commission is entitled to use the number of votes equal to the number of member states entitled to vote. The GFCM is currently funded by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN. Agreement has been reached on the need to establish an autonomous budget for the Commission.

Discussions continues on how contributions should be determined. Once the autonomous budget has been ratified the GFCM will be able to accept voluntary contributions offered either for the general run of its activities or for specific projects.

Pig Industry

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on average incomes in the pig industry in each of the past three years. [134788]

Ms Quin: The table shows the average Net Farm Income of full-time specialist pig farm businesses in England for each of the past three years. Farm income estimates for 1999–2000 will be available early in 2001.

Average income of full time specialist pig farms in England

Average £/farm

Year	*Net Farm Income*
1996–97	55,123
1997–98	13,728
1998–99	–32,979

Source:
Farm Business Survey

A rise in the price of pig meat since June 2000 will improve the situation of the pig sector in 2000–01.

Animal Husbandry

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what progress his Department has made on animal husbandry issues following the report of the Working Party into the role of cattle husbandry in the development of a sustainable policy to control M bovine infection in cattle; [133588]

(2) if he will publish the guidelines that the Bourne Expert Group is operating with regard to animal husbandry. [133589]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The Husbandry Panel report was published on 16 May this year. The Government welcomed the report and are considering its recommendations. We have sought the views of both the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB chaired by John Bourne and the TB Forum. The ISG's terms of reference provide for advising the Government, as required, on any aspect of its strategy to control TB in cattle. The TB Forum established a sub-group of its members to look at husbandry and bio-security issues with regard to cattle TB. This sub-group reported to the Forum's October meeting. The Government expect to publish its response to the Husbandry Panel report within the next few weeks.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Employment Zones

15. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the employment zone initiative. [132600]

Ms Jowell: The 15 Employment Zones have made a very good start. We have paid contractors for 1,061 long-term unemployed people having started in jobs up to the end of August. Latest information from our contractors suggests that over 2,000 long-term unemployed people have now been placed into work.

Labour Market Access

16. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the measures required to tackle labour market access for the most disadvantaged groups; and what policies are in place to address this situation. [132601]

Ms Hodge: Our Welfare to Work and Lifelong Learning strategies are about helping people, including those at greatest disadvantage, get and keep jobs. In designing and evaluating these policies, we take careful account of their impact on different groups in society. Our New Deals already target young people, the long-term unemployed, older workers, lone parents and disabled people. Extra help is available for those with additional disadvantages. In addition, Employment Zones and Action Teams for Jobs target those in disadvantaged communities.

Islington Arts and Media School

17. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much fresh start finance has been provided to Islington Arts and Media school. [132603]

Ms Estelle Morris: To date, approximately £3.15 million has been spent or committed on building work at the school since its Fresh Start in September 1999. The Department is currently considering a bid for the next phase of this improvement work. The school will also benefit from the extra revenue funding available to all Fresh Start schools, to support the progress the school is now making in raising standards.

Dance and Drama Scholarships

18. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the total number is of dance and drama scholarships to be made available this year. [132604]

Mr. Wicks: The number of Dance and Drama Awards available from September 2000 is 1,624. Of these 951 students have awards that are funded through the further education route. The awards for the remaining 673 students are funded through the higher education route.

These awards did not exist under the previous administration. We have successfully replaced the lottery which existed in the past, putting talent before postcodes.

Instead of paying fees of up to £8,000, award-winners only pay at most £1,050, in line with university students. Students with awards are also eligible for means tested help with their living and learning costs.

Direct Grants

19. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what direct grants are available from central Government for consolidating schools with a number of sites by rebuilding them on a single site; what the procedures are for applying for such funding; and what the time scale is for each type of grant. [132605]

Jacqui Smith: A number of funding routes will be available from 2001–02, which could be used for this purpose. Two routes may be best suited. For Voluntary Aided schools, proposals for such grant could have formed part of their capital funding applications to the Department, made via local authorities, by 30 September. Local authorities may also want to put in proposals for such projects, probably funded by borrowing approvals, under the Targeted Capital Fund, by 15 January. Overall capital expenditure plans for 2001–02 are £2.1 billion, compared with the £683 million a year spent under the previous administration in 1996–97.

Kingsbridge Community College is to receive £2.2 million for 2001–02, by means of an advance allocation of likely formula funding for condition for 2001–02.

Direct Grants (Schools)

20. **Mr. Cox:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money will be paid in direct grants to schools over the next three years. [132606]

Ms Estelle Morris: It is estimated that schools will be paid almost £1.7 billion in direct grants over the next three years. £545 million in 2001–02, with year-on-year increases of 2.75 per cent. in each of the following two years. Since 1997, funding per pupil has increased by over £300 per pupil (to some £3,100 per pupil this year). Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three-year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Work-life Balance

21. **Ms Julie Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what help is being offered to employers to develop policies which encourage a balance between work and life. [132608]

Ms Hodge: The work-life balance campaign aims to increase employers' awareness and take-up of work-life balance policies.

With an additional boost of nearly £1 million, we have increased the Challenge Fund to £3.2 million over three years. This is providing free advice to employers to bring benefits to their business and allow their employees to enjoy a better work-life balance.

We are working in partnership with Employers for Work-Life Balance (an independent group of 22 employers) to promote best practice. We are publishing a series of good practice guides giving employers practical advice.

Physical Education

22. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take steps to ensure that all schools comply with the minimum requirement of two hours physical education each week for all pupils. [132610]

Jacqui Smith: We have set a clear aspiration that all schools should provide two hours of physical activity a week. We are promoting this through a number of developments supported by a massive investment in sport in schools. The Prime Minister announced in September that £750 million would be invested in schools sport facilities as part of a £1 billion investment. We are working to inspire schools and partners in the sports sector to deliver the two hours aspiration through the Sports Strategy. Recent research confirms that the most popular out-of-school hours learning activity was participating in sport. This is particularly encouraging. Additionally, the Teacher Training Agency has allocated an indicative target of 399 primary PE Initial Teacher Training places to providers for the academic year 2000–01. This represents 3 per cent. of the overall primary target of 13,100 and shows a commitment to the recruitment of specialist PE teachers in primary schools.

Sure Start

24. **Mr. Olner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the new resources announced for the sure start programme in the comprehensive spending review. [132612]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

As announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 18 July, in the Spending Review Command Paper 4807, Sure Start has new resources of £449 million for 2002–03 and £499 million for 2003–04. These, added to the provision before the spending review of £448 million for the years 1999–2000 to 2001–02, bring the total resources for Sure Start to £1,396 million over the five-year period. As a result, the 250 programmes will be increased to around 500 programmes, and these will reach one third of children in poverty by 2003–04.

New Deal

25. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the net cost of the New Deal for Young People. [132613]

Ms Jowell: We have commissioned independent research on the net impact of the New Deal for Young People. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) published a first report in December 1999.

NIESR concluded that in its first year the New Deal had a positive impact on the levels of output and employment, and that the New Deal was close to self-financing because the extra activity it generated led to higher Government revenue.

A second summary report on the macroeconomic evaluation of New Deal, covering the first two years of the programme, will be published in the next few months.

34. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what he estimates to be the percentage deadweight in the new deals for employment. [132623]

Ms Jowell: The information requested is not yet available, but will be assessed as part of the evaluation of each of the New Deals. Information on deadweight in the New Deal for Young People will be included in the second summary report on the macroeconomic evaluation of the New Deal for Young People, due to be published this year.

Post-16 Education

26. **Mr. Drew:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what opportunities recent changes will give for greater collaboration between schools and further education colleges over post-16 education. [132614]

Mr. Wicks: The creation of a Learning and Skills Council will support collaboration, including through the development of a coherent funding formula across schools and FE. The system we inherited had achieved some success, but it was complex, fragmented and inadequate for the challenge of the 21st Century.

Pupil Spending

27. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment by how much spending per pupil will increase in real terms between 2000–01 and 2003–04. [132616]

Ms Estelle Morris: Total funding per pupil in England has increased by over £300 per pupil in real terms since 1997. The Year 2000 Spending Review means a real terms increase in planned spending of £370 over the three years bringing the total to almost £700 per pupil between 1997–98 and 2003–04. Spending per pupil fell by £60 in real terms under the last three years of the previous administration.

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the level of spending per school pupil since May 1997. [134221]

Ms Estelle Morris: Under this Government, funding per pupil has already increased by over £300 (to some £3,100 per pupil this year). In this year alone it has risen by £180. Under the last Government, funding per pupil fell by £60 in real terms between 1994–95 and 1997–98. There will be further increases in funding following the year 2000 spending review: a further £370 per pupil over the three-year period, taking the total increase to nearly £700 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

Departmental Administration Costs

28. **Mr. Garnier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the cost of administration in his Department. [132617]

Mr. Wills: The planned net running cost of the Department in 2000–01 is £252 million. A further £3.25 million is available this year from the Windfall Tax for DfEE administration. These and comparable figures for past years are set out in Annexes Ei and Eii of the Departmental Report (Cm 4602). They illustrate our success in reducing the costs of administration while delivering the Government's radical programme of reform for education and employment. The planned DfEE running cost for 2000–01 (excluding Windfall Tax funding) is £15 million or 6 per cent. less than in 1996–97. This represents a reduction in real terms of 15 per cent.

Further Education Funding

29. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on funding for pay in sixth-form and further education colleges. [132618]

Mr. Wicks: To help colleges meet the challenge to raise standards of learning, we have made available additional sums to improve the rewards for high calibre staff and to secure their recruitment and retention. My right hon. Friend announced on 18 July a £50 million increase in funding for further education lecturers' pay in 2001–02.

The Government are strongly committed to the continuation of the current independent arrangements for settling pay and conditions in the further education sector. These issues will remain a matter between employers and staff. Representatives of employers, unions and officials from this Department have started the process of designing appropriate mechanisms for further education.

Class Sizes

30. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on class sizes in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools since May 1997. [132619]

Ms Estelle Morris: The size of primary classes has gone down in each of the past two years after rising steadily throughout the previous 10 years. In January 1997, the size of the average primary class was 27.5. By January 2000 it had fallen to 27.1. The Government are well on target to deliver their pledge to limit the size of infant classes to 30 pupils, and 300,000 children have already benefited. £620 million is available to support the pledge, and allocations so far to York LEA amount to some £1.4 million. This has helped to reduce the size of the average Key Stage 1 class in the Vale of York to 24.2—the figure in January 1997 was 24.5. The size of the average Key Stage 2 class in the constituency has fallen to 27.1, from 27.2 in January 1997.

The size of the average secondary class in January 1997 was 21.7. In January 2000 it was 22.0, when the pupil-teacher ratio in secondary classes was 17.1. Secondary class sizes have been rising steadily since 1988, when the average figure was 19.9. However, a typical secondary school will in 2001–02 be receiving

£60,000 in direct grant to spend as they choose. If this was spent on teachers, the pupil-teacher ratio could be reduced by 0.6.

Education SSAs

31. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in the review of education standard spending assessments; and if he will make a statement. [132620]

Ms Estelle Morris: On 19 September, the Government published "Modernising local government finance—a green paper" which sets out our ideas for a fairer distribution of education funding between local authorities. It makes clear that there is a continuing and important role for LEAs in deciding—with their schools—how funding is distributed at local level. We are keen to hear views on the options set out in the Green Paper—there will be three months for responses which we will consider carefully before making any decisions.

Secondary School Achievements

32. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps are being taken to improve the achievement of children in secondary schools. [132621]

Ms Estelle Morris: In recent speeches, my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Secretary of State have set out the Government's vision for transforming secondary education. The initiatives include: introducing a pilot scheme to focus on boosting pupil achievement at Key Stage 3; expanding the geographical range and scope of the 'Excellence in Cities' programme; expanding the number of specialist schools; introducing City Academies to areas of urban disadvantage; and investing in professional development for our teachers.

Child Care Workers

33. **Mr. Peter Bradley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the response to the Government's campaign to recruit child care workers. [132622]

Ms Hodge: The response to the campaign has been very positive and encouraging. By 15 October, the high-profile media and press advertising had generated some 41,728 calls to the national recruitment helpline and 41,321 booklets have been sent out to callers.

Education Services (Leeds)

35. **Mr. Burgon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment under what circumstances the services provided by the proposed Joint Venture Company will return to the sole control of Leeds local education authority. [132624]

Ms Estelle Morris: Leeds City Council, the Local Education Authority, will be responsible for ensuring that services to schools, pupils and parents in Leeds are delivered on its behalf to an agreed specification under the contractual arrangement with the proposed joint venture company. The joint venture company will take day-to-day responsibility for delivery, and will have the power to take the necessary operational decisions. The contract will be for a fixed period, not yet determined. Towards the end of the contract, the Secretary of State and Leeds City Council will need to come to a view on arrangements for the future delivery of relevant services.

Mature Students

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the drop-out rate for mature students was in higher education for the last 12 months for which figures are available. [132593]

Mr. Wicks: The latest "Performance Indicators in Higher Education" published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England give an overall non-completion rate for students starting full-time first degree courses in the UK in 1997–98 of 17 per cent. a figure which has stayed roughly constant since 1991–92. It is not possible to disaggregate the relevant data by age. We announced in January a substantial package of additional financial support for mature students.

Local Education Authorities

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the future role of local education authorities. [132611]

Ms Estelle Morris: Local education authorities have four essential functions related to schools: special educational needs, access and school transport, school improvement and strategic management.

We are working with LEAs and other partners to develop new and better ways of securing the delivery of education services.

Skills Training

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what actions he is taking to promote skills training related to automotive design and manufacturing. [132591]

Mr. Wicks: The promotion of skills training is at the heart of our decision to set up the Learning and Skills Council and to strengthen the National Training Organisations.

The motor industry is critical to Britain's competitiveness—and of course vital to the economy of the West Midlands—where the Government have made £129 million available for economic regeneration and job creation.

The industry has over 13,000 Modern Apprentices, is a priority sector for the Ufl, and will be central to the skills and training agenda of the local LSC in Birmingham.

Numeracy and Literacy

Ms Christine Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to improve basic numeracy and literacy skills through the New Deal. [132602]

Ms Jowell: We have introduced, for the first time ever, comprehensive arrangements to identify, assess and tackle basic numeracy and literacy skills problems. By extending these arrangements to meet the challenge of basic employability, no one should leave the New Deal without the opportunity to improve reading and writing ability.

Top Universities (Access)

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to increase access to the top universities. [132607]

Mr. Wicks: In September, we launched a three-year, £150 million programme, the Excellence Challenge to further widen participation in higher education. All higher education institutions in England, 800 secondary schools and 600 FE Colleges in Excellence in Cities areas will be funded. They will work with young people from the age of 13 and provide them with the information, resources and encouragement which they need to apply for and enter higher education, including the most demanding institutions.

School Transport

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on travel costs for schools in rural areas. [132615]

Ms Estelle Morris: We recognise the higher cost of school transport in rural areas through the sparsity allowance in local education authorities' standard spending assessments.

E-universities

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on recent developments in the establishment of an e-university in the United Kingdom. [134224]

Mr. Wicks: The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has responsibility for the development of the e-universities project, which aims to establish a globally competitive provider of internet-based higher education. The Secretary of State announced on 14 September that the Government would make £14 million available to HEFCE to support the project in 2001–02. On 10 October, HEFCE issued a consultation paper on the business model for the e-universities; and the private sector will be invited to express interest in becoming potential partners in the project.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent consultations he has held with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. [134214]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Secretary of State and his Ministers regularly seek advice from the QCA on a wide range of matters that fall within the remit of the Authority. Among the issues on which the Secretary of State has received advice from the QCA are the introduction of vocational GCSEs, the development of advanced extension awards, raising standards at Key Stage 3 and access to marked examination scripts.

University Degrees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students obtained a first degree at *(a)* universities established before 1992, *(b)* universities established under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, *(c)* colleges of higher education, *(d)* further education colleges and *(e)* otherwise, in the last three years. [134216]

Mr. Wicks: The latest available data are shown in the following table. Figures for 1999–2000 will be available in February 2001.

UK domiciled students obtaining first degrees in English institutions

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Pre 1992 Universities	75,181	73,839	76,818
Universities established under the 1992 FHE Act	81,656	82,719	83,246
Colleges of HE	24,742	24,335	24,430
FE colleges[1]	1,048	4,454	4,234
Other[2]	9,217	8,610	8,574
Total	191,844	193,957	197,302

[1] Because of under-reporting by institutions, the figures for 1996–97 are not comparable with later years.
[2] Covers the Open University; excludes the University of Buckingham, and other private and independent HE institutions.

Higher Education (Accountability)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking in conjunction with Higher Education Funding Council for England to simplify and reduce the cost to higher education institutions of compliance with quality and accountability requirements. [134218]

Mr. Wicks: This is a matter for the Higher Education Funding Councils, together with institutions. HEFCE is consulting on the report published in August on Better Accountability and will publish the results of their consultation. The Quality Assurance Agency has devised new procedures to remove some of the burden from the institutions of subject review and institutional audit, especially where standards are already high.

Specialist Schools

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what detailed restrictions on applications by schools for specialist status have been announced since July; how many schools had *(a)* made formal applications and *(b)* entered into preliminary discussions with the Department about making a bid; how many bids have been aborted or delayed in consequence; what impact there has been on the distribution of specialties across the country; what costs have been incurred by bidding schools; what private funds have been raised; and if he will make a statement. [134219]

Ms Estelle Morris: The specialist schools programme has grown from 181 schools in May 1997 to a network of 535 schools and we have plans for 1,000 specialist schools by 2004. Unlike under the previous Administration, there is now a substantial budget for specialist schools and a clear programme of expansion. Currently, around 19 per cent. of secondary pupils attend specialist schools, compared with 6 per cent. in May 1997. That percentage will increase to over 30 per cent. by 2004. There is no permanent upper limit on the number of specialist schools that there can be in any area, nor on the number of pupils. However, in order to ensure that all parts of the country have an opportunity to benefit from the expanded programme, my Department wrote in July to LEAs indicating to them that where

specialist schools were already educating over 30 per cent. of their pupils, we would not want to receive further applications until we had ensured a fairer spread in other parts of the country. This does not mean that in the future, subject to resources being available, no further bids will be considered.

The LEAs where currently over 30 per cent. of pupils attend specialist schools are: Bath and North East Somerset, Milton Keynes, Northamptonshire, North Somerset, Northumberland, Rutland, West Berkshire and Wigan. I have indicated to those LEAs also that, in exceptional circumstances, where applications have already been prepared, we would be willing to consider them. While we have received no formal applications from schools in these areas in the current Technology and Language College competitions, we have had discussions with six schools which were planning applications and are discussing with each whether we could support their application coming forward. We have so far agreed that two of these should submit an application. The costs incurred by bidding schools are not known but, as these cases demonstrate, our arrangements provide for schools to draw our attention to exceptional circumstances such as a nearly completed application, including where the sponsorship has been raised.

Higher Education Applications

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on applications to higher education institutions since July, and the number of places available. [134220]

Mr. Wicks: The number of applicants through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service to full-time and sandwich first degree, and Higher National Diploma courses at UK institutions since July, is 35,177. The total number of acceptances as at 11 October is 336,930, an increase of 1.9 per cent. on last year. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service statistics do not include students wishing to enrol on part-time courses. Information on all entrants to higher education courses will be collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

Foundation Degrees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on recent developments in the establishment of foundation degrees. [134222]

Mr. Wicks: The core features of foundation degrees were set out in the 'Foundation degree prospectus', issued in July by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. These features will ensure that the foundation degree becomes a valued vocational HE qualification that meets employers' needs. The prospectus also invited bids from consortia to design and develop the prototype foundation degree programmes.

HEFCE received proposals from 56 consortia of HEIs, FECs and employers by the deadline earlier this month. This represents well over half of institutions with degree awarding powers drawn from across the higher education sector. We welcome this enthusiastic response and clear commitment to foundation degrees. The successful consortia will be announced in late November.

Learning and Skills Councils

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will report progress on the establishment of local learning and skills councils and on the appointment of *(a)* their chairmen and *(b)* their members. [134223]

Mr. Wicks: We are making good progress in establishing the 47 local arms of the Learning and Skills Council. All 47 local Chairs and local Executive Directors have been appointed and we aim to announce local Council members by the end of November.

International Students

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the proportion of the international student market recently secured by higher education institutions in the United Kingdom; and what plans he has to increase this proportion. [134225]

Mr. Wicks: Some 18 per cent. of English-speaking international students (from outside the European Union) study in the United Kingdom, the remaining 82 per cent. studying almost exclusively in either the United States or Australia. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced the target of increasing this market share to 25 per cent. by 2005. Recent data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service show that acceptances by international students for undergraduate courses beginning in the 2000–01 academic year have increased by 8.2 per cent., compared to a rise of 1.9 per cent. for all UK undergraduates.

As part of my right hon. Friend's initiative to attract more international students to the UK, we have developed the Education UK Brand, a three-year world-wide campaign to promote the UK to potential students. We have made it easier for international students to come to the UK by making the visa service more user-friendly, normally allowing them from the outset leave to remain for the full duration of their course, and making it easier for them to work while studying. The number of places on the Chevening scholarship scheme has also been increased.

Court Judgments

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the impact on the budgets of local education authorities of recent court judgments concerning special educational needs, with special reference to the four cases of Phelps, Jarvis, Anderton and a 16-year-old referred to as G. [134226]

Jacqui Smith: The impact on budgets of individual local education authorities of recent court judgments will depend on the number of further cases successfully brought before the courts. It is not possible to predict the likely number of such cases but it should be noted that in the Phelps case, so far the only one of the cases in which the facts have been considered and in which the court decided there had been negligence, the judgment recognised that

> the professionalism, dedication and standards of those engaged in the provision of educational services are such that cases of negligence will be exceptional.

Business Links

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to *(a)* support and *(b)* encourage links between higher education and business. [134290]

Mr. Wicks: The Government plan to support and encourage higher education-business links through the establishment of a continuing stream of funding for institutions' work with business and the community. The Higher Education Funding Council for England has already allocated £82.16 million (including a contribution from DTI) for projects running until 2004 under the Higher Education Reach-Out to Business and the Community Fund. This fund will be incorporated into a new Higher Education Innovation Fund from the next financial year, which will also include an additional £80 million over three years from the Office for Science and Technology.

We also support activities to enable and encourage HE-business interaction to enhance the work-readiness of graduates. Higher education institutions are involving employers in the development of the new foundation degrees that are designed to meet the skills gap at the higher technician and associate professional level. We are also working with higher education institutions and National Training Organisations to develop Graduate Apprenticeships as a means of equipping graduates with an honours degree or higher-level qualification for work in specific employment sectors.

Performance Tables

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment further to his answer of 20 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 305–06W, on performance tables, whether pupils recently arrived from overseas will be counted as being on school rolls in respect of Key Stage 3 test results. [134383]

Jacqui Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1039W.

Milk (Schools)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he gives to headteachers and governors about the provision of subsidised milk in schools and the entitlement of pupils to receive free school milk. [134397]

Jacqui Smith: Schools and local education authorities are not obliged to provide milk for their pupils, but where they do so it must by law be supplied free of charge to those children whose parents are in receipt of either Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. The Government issued guidance in September 1996. The Government encourage schools that do not provide drinking milk to consider doing so and to make use of either the EU School Milk Subsidy Scheme or the Welfare Food Scheme. These schemes are administered by the Intervention Board, on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and the Department of Health respectively, and it is for them to issue guidance as they consider necessary.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Meetings

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Prime Minister what matters, other than the new agenda for reform of the police, were discussed at his meeting with the Home Secretary on 26 June; if he will place a copy of the minutes in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [134860]

The Prime Minister: It has been established practice under successive administrations not to disclose details of confidential discussions between Ministers.

TREASURY

Central Heating Fuel

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by how much the cost of central heating fuel has risen due to *(a)* the increase in the price of crude oil and *(b)* increases in taxation, since 1 April 1998. [134292]

Mr. Timms: The information requested is contained in the Department of Trade and Industry's monthly statistical bulletin, "Energy Trends, March 1999". A copy of which is available in the House of Commons Library.

The rise in taxation was preceded in September 1997 by the Government's reduction in the rate of VAT on fuel and power used domestically, cutting the rate of VAT from 8 per cent. to 5 per cent., the lowest level allowed under European Community law.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families he estimates are currently eligible for the Working Families Tax Credit; and how many of those are in receipt of it. [134427]

Dawn Primarolo: The number of families in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit at the end of August 2000 is provisionally estimated at 1,123,000. This compares with 817,000 families who were in receipt of Family Credit in August 1999. The number of individuals and families in receipt of the Disabled Persons Tax Credit is provisionally estimated at 25,400. This compares with 18,469 recipients under Disability Working Allowance in August 1999.

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last discussed Government policy on the euro with the Federation of Small Businesses. [134652]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor meets many business representatives to discuss a wide range of issues.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what constitutional issues he considered in deciding that there was no constitutional bar to future British entry to the euro. [134651]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor's October 1997 statement set out the Government's position on the constitutional issue.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what period of time his five economic tests would have to have been met for him to decide that convergence had been achieved. [135025]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The determining factor underpinning any Government decision is whether the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has said we will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of the result of the Danish referendum on the single European currency. [134939]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Danish membership of EMU is a matter for the Danish people.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last met *(a)* the Foreign Secretary and *(b)* the Northern Ireland Secretary to discuss the implications of replacing the pound with the single European currency. [135024]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer meets his Cabinet colleagues on a regular basis and discusses a wide range of issues.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the progress towards each of his five economic tests for replacing the pound with the single European currency being met. [134940]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer has said we will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

New Taxes

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many new taxes he has introduced since May 1997. [134649]

Dawn Primarolo: Information on taxation is in the Financial Statement and Budget Reports, which can be found in the House of Commons Library.

Disabled Persons Learning Credit

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the take-up of the disabled persons learning credit. [134722]

Dawn Primarolo: We are not aware of the existence of the disabled persons learning credit.

Gold Reserves

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the current value in pounds sterling is of those euros purchased with the proceeds of United Kingdom gold reserves sold and invested in the euro; [134915]

(2) what the value was in pounds sterling of United Kingdom gold reserves sold and invested in the euro; [134914]

(3) what his long-term plans are regarding the maintenance of Britain's gold reserves. [134971]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury is planning to reduce its gold holdings to around 300 tonnes over the medium term, as announced on 7 May 1999.

Details of the proceeds from each of the eight gold auctions held to date can be found on the Bank of England's website (www.bankofengland.co.uk/press.htm). The proceeds have been reinvested in interest-bearing foreign currency assets. The currency split being broadly the same as that of the net reserves. Details of this can be found in the "Exchange Equalisation Account: Accounts 1997–98", published 26 January 2000.

Pre-Budget Report

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff in his Department worked on the 1999 Pre-Budget report. [134725]

Dawn Primarolo: A number of staff in the Treasury worked on the 1999 Pre-Budget Report.

Financial Services

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent developments there have been in the regulation of financial services. [135644]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, which received Royal Assent on 14 June, provides a framework for the completion of the modernisation of financial services regulation announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in May 1997.

Parliament will be asked to approve secondary legislation under the Act. The Treasury has today issued two consultation documents: on the scope of FSA regulation; and on the framework for the promotion of financial services. In the document on scope there are draft Orders on regulated activities; when regulated activities are and are not being carried on by way of business; persons who will be exempt from the requirement for FSA authorisation; the exemption of appointed representatives of an authorised person; and activities which will not be exempt regulated activities under Part XX of the Act. In the document on the framework for promotion of financial services there are draft Orders on financial promotion and on the promotion of collective investment scheme.

The Government have previously announced a number of areas which it proposes should be subject to FSA regulation, in order to strike a better balance between the interests of providers and consumers of financial services. The principal change is the regulation of mortgage lending, on which the Treasury has today issued a further consultation document. Other areas which the Government propose be brought into the scope of FSA regulation are pre-paid funeral plans, deposit taking by credit unions and Lloyd's insurance.

Copies of all three consultation documents have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. Further copies are available from the Treasury, and can also be accessed via the Treasury's website (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk).

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Egypt

Mr. Tynan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the Egyptian Government to ensure Shaiboob William Arsal's appeal against his conviction for murder is held in an open and transparent manner. [133847]

Mr. Hain: We are aware of the circumstances of Shaiboob William Arsal's trial. The case is now sub judice under Egyptian law following his appeal to the Court of Cassation on 12 June. We would not want to make any comment that might prejudice his appeal. However, we shall continue to follow the course of his case closely as we shall all reports of human rights concern.

Arms Exports

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government have taken to consolidate the UK's national criteria against which the Government assess licence applications to export arms and dual-use equipment with those of the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports; and if he will make a statement. [135683]

Mr. Hain: Licences to export arms and other goods controlled for strategic reasons are issued by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, acting through the Export Control Organisation of the DTI. All relevant individual licence applications are circulated by DTI to other Government Departments with an interest, as determined by those Departments in line with their own policy responsibilities. These include the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development.

In the Foreign Secretary's reply to my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms) on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, column 27, he set out the criteria which would be used in considering advance approvals for promotion prior to formal application for an export licence, applications for licences to export miliary equipment, and dual-use goods where there are grounds for believing that the end-user will be the armed forces or internal security forces of the recipient country. As my right hon. Friend said then, the Government are committed to the maintenance of a strong defence industry as part of our industrial base as well as of our defence effort, and recognise that defence exports can also contribute to international stability by strengthening collective defence relationships; but believe that arms transfers must be managed responsibly. We have since taken a range of measures designed to ensure the highest standards of responsibility in our export control policies. These include the adoption during the UK's Presidency of the EU of a Code of Conduct on Arms Exports; the publication of Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls which are among the most transparent of those of any arms exporting country; the ban on the export of equipment used for torture; the ratification of the Ottawa Convention on anti-personnel landmines and the passage of the Land Mines Act; and our many efforts to combat illicit trafficking in and destabilising accumulations of small arms.

Since the Council of the European Union adopted the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports on 8 June 1998, all relevant licence applications have been assessed against the UK's national criteria and those in the Code of Conduct, which represent minimum standards that all member states have agreed to apply. The criteria in the EU Code of Conduct are compatible with those which I announced in July 1997. At the same time there is a large degree of overlap between the two. It is clearly in the interests of Government Departments involved in assessing licence applications, British exporters and other interested parties that the criteria which are used should be set out as clearly and unambiguously as possible.

With immediate effect, therefore, the following consolidated criteria will be used in considering all individual applications for licences to export goods on the Military List, which forms Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994; advance approvals for promotion prior to formal application for an export licence; and licence applications for the export of dual-use goods as specified in Annexe 1 of Council Decision 94/942/CFSP when there are grounds for believing that the end-user of such goods will be the armed forces or internal security forces or similar entities in the recipient country, or that the goods will be used to produce arms or other goods on the Military List for such end-users. The criteria are based on those in the EU Code of Conduct, incorporating elements from the UK's national criteria where appropriate. As before, they will not be applied mechanistically but on a case-by-case basis, using judgment and commonsense. Neither the fact of this consolidation, nor any minor additions or amendments to the wording of the two sets of criteria used before, should be taken to imply any change in policy or in its application.

An export licence will not be issued if the arguments for doing so are outweighed by the need to comply with the UK's international obligations and commitments, by concern that the goods might be used for internal repression or international aggression, by the risks to regional stability or by other considerations as described in these criteria.

Criterion One

Respect for the UK's international commitments, in particular sanctions decreed by the UN Security Council and those decreed by the European Community, agreements on non-proliferation and other subjects, as well as other international obligations.

The Government will not issue an export licence if approval would be inconsistent with, inter alia:

(a) the UK's international obligations and its commitments to enforce UN, OSCE and EU arms embargoes, as well as national embargoes observed by the UK and other commitments regarding the application of strategic export controls;

(b) the UK's international obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention;

(c) the UK's commitments in the frameworks of the Australia Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement;

(d) the Guidelines for Conventional Arms Transfers agreed by the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council, the OSCE Principles Governing Conventional Arms Transfers and the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports;

(e) the UK's obligations under the Ottawa Convention and the 1998 Land Mines Act;

(f) the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

Criterion Two

The respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the country of final destination.

Having assessed the recipient country's attitude towards relevant principles established by international human rights instruments, the Government will:

(a) not issue an export licence if there is a clear risk that the proposed export might be used for internal repression;

(b) exercise special caution and vigilance in issuing licences, on a case-by-case basis and taking account of the nature of the equipment, to countries where serious violations of human rights have been established by the competent bodies of the UN, the Council of Europe or by the EU.

For these purposes, equipment which might be used for internal repression will include, inter alia, equipment where there is evidence of the use of this or similar equipment for internal repression by the proposed end-user, or where there is reason to believe that the equipment will be diverted from its stated end-use or end-user and used for internal repression.

The nature of the equipment will be considered carefully, particularly if it is intended for internal security purposes. Internal repression includes, inter alia, torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment; summary, arbitrary or extra-judicial executions; disappearances; arbitrary detentions; and other major suppression or violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms as set out in relevant international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The Government considers that in some cases the use of force by a Government within its own borders, for example to preserve law and order against terrorists or other criminals, is legitimate and does not constitute internal repression, as long as force is used in accordance with the international human rights standards described.

Criterion Three

The internal situation in the country of final destination, as a function of the existence of tensions or armed conflicts.

The Government will not issue licences for exports which would provoke or prolong armed conflicts or aggravate existing tensions or conflicts in the country of final destination.

Criterion Four

Preservation of regional peace, security and stability.

The Government will not issue an export licence if there is a clear risk that the intended recipient would use the proposed export aggressively against another country or to assert by force a territorial claim. However a purely theoretical possibility that the items concerned might be used in the future against another state will not of itself lead to a licence being refused.

When considering these risks, the Government will take into account inter alia:

(a) the existence or likelihood of armed conflict between the recipient and another country;

(b) a claim against the territory of a neighbouring country which the recipient has in the past tried or threatened to pursue by means of force;

(c) whether the equipment would be likely to be used other than for the legitimate national security and defence of the recipient;

(d) the need not to affect adversely regional stability in any significant way, taking into account the balance of forces between the states of the region concerned, their relative expenditure on defence, the potential for the equipment significantly to enhance the effectiveness of existing capabilities or to improve force projection, and the need not to introduce into the region new capabilities which would be likely to lead to increased tension.

Criterion Five

The national security of the UK, of territories whose external relations are the UK's responsibility, and of allies, EU member states and other friendly countries.

The Government will take into account:

(a) the potential effect of the proposed export on the UK's defence and security interests or on those of other territories and countries as described above, while recognising that this factor cannot affect consideration of the criteria on respect of human rights and on regional peace, security and stability;

(b) the risk of the goods concerned being used against UK forces or on those of other territories and countries as described above;

(c) the risk of reverse engineering or unintended technology transfer;

(d) the need to protect UK military classified information and capabilities.

Criterion Six

The behaviour of the buyer country with regard to the international community, as regards in particular to its attitude to terrorism, the nature of its alliances and respect for international law.

The Government will take into account inter alia the record of the buyer country with regard to:

(a) its support or encouragement of terrorism and international organised crime;

(b) its compliance with its international commitments, in particular on the non-use of force, including under international humanitarian law applicable to international and non-international conflicts;

(c) its commitment to non-proliferation and other areas of arms control and disarmament, in particular the signature, ratification and implementation of relevant arms control and disarmament conventions referred to in sub-para (b) of Criterion One.

Criterion Seven

The existence of a risk that the equipment will be diverted within the buyer country or re-exported under undesirable conditions.

In assessing the impact of the proposed export on the importing country and the risk that exported goods might be diverted to an undesirable end-user, the following will be considered:

(a) the legitimate defence and domestic security interests of the recipient country, including any involvement in UN or other peace-keeping activity;

(b) the technical capability of the recipient country to use the equipment;

(c) the capability of the recipient country to exert effective export controls.

The Government will pay particular attention to the need to avoid diversion of UK exports to terrorist organisations. Proposed exports of anti-terrorist equipment will be given particularly careful consideration in this context.

Criterion Eight

The compatibility of the arms exports with the technical and economic capacity of the recipient country, taking into account the desirability that states should achieve their legitimate needs of security and defence with the least diversion for armaments of human and economic resources.

The Government will take into account, in the light of information from relevant sources such as United Nations Development Programme, World bank, IMF and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reports, whether the proposed export would seriously undermine the economy or seriously hamper the sustainable development of the recipient country.

The Government will consider in this context the recipient country's relative levels of military and social expenditure, taking into account also any EU or bilateral aid, and its public finances, balance of payments, external debt, economic and social development and any IMF- or World bank-sponsored economic reform programme.

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Other Factors

Operative Provision 10 of the EU Code of Conduct specifies that member states may where appropriate also take into account the effect of proposed exports on their economic, social, commercial and industrial interests, but that these factors will not affect the application of the criteria in the Code.

The Government will thus continue when considering export licence applications to give full weight to the UK's national interest, including:

(a) the potential effect on the UK's economic, financial and commercial interests, including our long-term interests in having stable, democratic trading partners;

(b) the potential effect on the UK's relations with the recipient country;

(c) the potential effect on any collaborative defence production or procurement project with allies or EU partners;

(d) the protection of the UK's essential strategic industrial base.

In the application of the criteria, account will be taken of reliable evidence, including, for example, reporting from diplomatic posts, relevant reports by international bodies, intelligence and information from open sources and non-governmental organisations.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Protection of Children

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he made available draft guidance on Part II of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill concerning the protection of children. [135510]

Mr. Boateng: Draft copies of the guidance for Part II of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill concerning the Protection of Children were placed in the Library of the House on Monday 2 October 2000.

This is a preliminary draft of non-statutory guidance intended for those organisations that will be involved in implementing the scheme. We are seeking comments on it from a range of those organisations. It has been made available to provide an indication of how the scheme might work in practice, and to inform debate on this subject.

Ethnic Minorities

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the first annual report on progress on his race equality employment targets for minority ethnic staff in his Department and its service areas. [135509]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will, tomorrow, publish the document "Race Equality—The Home Secretary's Employment Targets—The First Annual Report on Progress". This report covers progress on recruitment, retention and career progression targets for minority ethnic staff in the Home Office, the prison, the police, the fire and probation services. A copy of the report will also be placed in the Library.

Licensing Hours

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if permitted hours of opening for licensed premises and registered members' clubs in England and Wales will be extended on 31 December; and if he will make a statement. [135506]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: New Year's Eve is regarded as a special occasion and licensing justices and the magistrates' courts may, on receipt of application, grant special orders of exemption under the Licensing Act 1964, allowing licensed premises and registered members' clubs to remain open beyond the normal permitted hours. There is no limit on the extension which may be granted. This has been the practice on every New Year's Eve in the years before the Millennium. All licensees and registered members' clubs wishing to apply for extensions should do so as soon as possible.

This year 31 December falls on a Sunday. Permitted hours for pubs, nightclubs, restaurants and registered members' clubs in England and Wales on a Sunday normally end at 10.30 pm. The Magistrates' Association and the Justices' Clerks' Society have jointly issued guidance to the licensing justices and magistrates' courts suggesting that an extension to 12.30 am on New Year's Day morning would normally be appropriate. Magistrates will be able to determine what is appropriate for their local area and may determine a later time. Where extensions are granted, this will help people to enjoy a festive New Year as they have done in the past under similar procedures.

Because of the unique nature of last year's Millennium celebrations, permitted hours were extended nationally by amending the Licensing Act 1964 using a deregulation order, approved by Parliament, which came into force in July 1999. The Government had originally proposed applying this arrangement to all future New Year's Eves, but limited it to Millennium Eve after concerns expressed by the House of Lords Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee. The Millennium arrangements worked well; and the Government wanted to make a further deregulation order for this New Year's Eve, to provide a more typical test of the national extension. But in March the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee said in its Ninth Report (1999–2000 Parliamentary session, 15 March 2000) that they would be highly unlikely to support any further licensing deregulation ahead of general licensing reform. To bring an appropriate deregulation order into force before next New Year's Eve, under the timescales dictated by the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 for mandatory public consultation and parliamentary scrutiny, would have required the Government to initiate the process by the end of March. In July, the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee agreed to give consideration to a further proposal in respect of New Year's Eve. By then it was too late, consistent with the requirements of the 1994 Act, to bring forward a similar order which could come into effect for this New Year's Eve. In reply to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) on 20 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 329W, I made it clear that the timescales for statutory public consultation and the subsequent parliamentary process were dictated by the 1994 Act, and it was now unlikely that the process could be completed in time for next New Year. We examined whether, with the co-operation of the Delegated Powers and Deregulation Committee and colleagues in both Houses, it was possible to obtain an Order in shorter time than that initially envisaged. We concluded that if we had done so it would have been open to legal challenge with an uncertain outcome. We have therefore decided against taking that course. We intend, however, to prepare such an order to

apply to New Year's Eve next year, which will then provide a further test of the success of a standard national exemption.

We remain wholly committed to the general reform of licensing law as described in the White Paper "Time for Reform", published in April this year, which would include provision for the Secretary of State to set appropriate opening times nationally for licensed premises for any special national celebrations.

Anti-terrorism Legislation

Mr. Darvill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he received the report from John Rowe QC on the operation of those provisions of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 which are not already included in the existing review of anti-terrorism legislation. [135508]

Mr. Straw: Mr. Rowe has completed his investigations into the operation of the relevant provisions of the Act and communicated his findings to me on 29 August. He has found that sections 5, 6 and 7 of the Act have not yet been used.

Crime Statistics (Taunton)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes *(a)* were reported and *(b)* led to convictions in the Taunton constituency in each year since 1979. [134318]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Details of reported crime are not available. Information on the numbers of crimes recorded by the police in the Taunton Deane local authority area has been provided by the Avon and Somerset Constabulary. The figures cover the 1993–94 financial year onwards. I understand that information for earlier years is not available.

Recorded offences in Taunton Deane

	Number
1993–94	9,602
1994–95	9,630
1995–96	8,683
1996–97	9,692
1997–98	9,526
1998–99	8,764
1998–99[1]	9,247
1999–2000[1]	8,560

[1] New counting rules

Available information held centrally on the Home Office Court Proceedings Database, showing the number of offenders convicted of indictable offences at Taunton Deane Petty Sessional Division, are as follows:

Offenders convicted for indictable offences at Taunton Deane PSD[1]

	Number
1979	571
1984	724
1989	510
1993	505
1994	497
1995	450
1996	479
1997	566
1998	533
1999[2]	576

[1] Includes those found guilty at the Crown Court where the committing Petty Sessional Division was Taunton Deane

[2] Provisional

Note:

Due to disproportionate cost, selected years only are given

It is important to note that as recorded crime data relate to offences, and convictions data relate to offenders, the two sets of figures are not directly comparable.

Entry Refusals

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received over the proposed sum to be paid by those who will wish to lodge an appeal against the refusal of a visitor's entry certificate. [134423]

Mrs. Roche: We have received representations expressing concern about the level of the fees from seven Members of Parliament and from the National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux.

This summer, we consulted 36 organisations and individuals on the terms of the Immigration Appeals (Family Visitor) Regulations. Six of the 10 respondents asked us to reconsider the charges. In partnership with the Lord Chancellor's Department, we addressed these concerns by reviewing the estimated costs of these appeals and reducing both fees, in the case of a disposal on the papers by nearly 50 per cent.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will consult further over the amount to be paid by those who will wish to lodge an appeal against the refusal of a visitor's entry certificate. [134424]

Mrs. Roche: We will conduct a review of the family visit visa appeal scheme in due course. The terms of that review have not yet been decided.

Following consultation on the proposed Immigration Appeals (Family Visitor) Regulations, we reduced the fee for appealing. The reduction was nearly 50 per cent. in the case of paper disposals, which we expect to form the majority of cases. We will need to assess how the current arrangements are working before we consider changing them again.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place the responses to the consultation document Refusal of Entry to the United Kingdom on Grounds of Criminal Conviction in the Library; what action he plans to take to amend the relevant immigration rules in the light of the consultations; and if he will make a statement. [134870]

Mrs. Roche: I refer to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend, the Member for Gillingham (Mr. Clark) on 24 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 115W.

Police Training

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to reform police training practices; and if he will make a statement. [134851]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary published the Government's proposals to reform police training in May 2000, following a period of consultation with the key stakeholders. The proposals are set out in the paper, "Police Training: The Way Forward", which represents an ambitious programme to raise standards and ensure relevant profession-long training for all staff. The measures requiring legislation will be implemented at the earliest legislative opportunity. Work is already in hand to implement within available funds the non-legislative proposals. A steering group drawn from the Police Training Council is overseeing most of these arrangements.

Immigration (Overstayers)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what obligations there are on *(a)* public authorities and *(b)* others who discover overstayers to report them to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate; and if he will make a statement. [134876]

Mrs. Roche: There is no legal duty for either public bodies or private individuals to report overstayers to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. However, as with any other offence, I would urge anyone who suspects that an offence has been committed to inform the appropriate authorities.

Asylum Seekers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reimburse local authorities for spending incurred in relation to *(a)* the establishment and *(b)* the running costs of regional consortia for the provision of accommodation to asylum seekers, where no contract for such provision is to be entered into. [134865]

Mrs. Roche: The establishment and running costs of Regional Consortia are met by the Home Office through the Enabling Grant. If any Consortium does not enter into contracts for accommodation, the portion of the grant relating to the co-ordination of local and regional services can still be provided.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are currently being supported under the National Asylum Seekers Support scheme; and how many are receiving both accommodation and vouchers from NASS. [134864]

Mrs. Roche: As at the end of September 2000, 14,200[1] asylum seekers, including dependants, are being supported under the scheme administered by the National Asylum Seekers Support Service. Of these 9,500[1] have been allocated support of both accommodation and vouchers.

[1] Figures rounded to nearest hundred

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many in-country applications for asylum were submitted in each of the last five years for which figures are available by persons who had been in the United Kingdom for *(a)* six months or less, *(b)* more than six months, but less than 12 months and *(c)* 12 months or more. [134873]

Mrs. Roche: I regret that reliable information on the date of arrival for persons making an in-country asylum application is not yet available. The information that is available is given in the table.

	Asylum applications received in-country[1]
1995	29,555
1996	17,205
1997	15,915
1998	22,670
1999[2]	41,700

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 5

[2] Provisional

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers who have *(a)* been granted asylum, *(b)* been granted exceptional leave to remain and *(c)* not had their applications for asylum determined are on (i) further and (ii) higher education courses in the United Kingdom; what is the cost to public funds; and if he will make a statement. [134874]

Mrs. Roche: The latest information available shows that 13,685 students in further education colleges in 1998–99 were asylum seekers (that is, had not had their applications for asylum finally determined). The cost of their education is not currently available.

Information on the number of asylum seekers in higher education is not available, and no information on the number of those granted asylum or exceptional leave to remain in further or higher education is available.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent on *(a)* the provision of legal aid and *(b)* other legal services for asylum seekers in each of the last five years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [134867]

Mrs. Roche: The information is not available in the form requested. In England and Wales in the last five years legal aid has been provided in immigration and nationality cases, including to those seeking asylum as follows:

£

	Total cost
1995–96	23,929
1996–97	26,146
1997–98	35,218
1998–99	48,800
1999–2000	46,167

Grant in aid has been given to Immigration Advisory Service and to the Refugee Legal Centre in the following table, to provide representation in all immigration cases including asylum seekers. The grant is not broken down into asylum seekers and others.

Refugee Legal Centre

£

	Payment
1995–96	3,061,487
1996–97	3,082,000
1997–98	2,584,733
1998–99	3,263,100
1999–2000	3,353,000

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which recommendations of the Vantagepoint report on asylum procedures have been implemented to date; which have yet to be implemented; which will not be implemented; and if he will make a statement. [134875]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the right hon. Lady to the answer the Secretary of State for the Home Office gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) on 29 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 255W, which set out the background to the radical overhaul of asylum decision-making processes that this Government have undertaken. The Asylum Process Project/Vantagepoint Report was part of this process.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary agreed in principle that the fundamental changes to the process suggested in the report should be pursued, but it was never the intention that this should be done in isolation. Many changes had already been put in place, prior to the completion of the report, as part of our strategy to speed up processes across the asylum business as a whole.

Substantial improvements have already been made. IND has made almost 81,000 asylum decisions so far this calendar year, compared with less then 25,000 during the same period last year, an increase of 225 per cent. Decisions continue to outstrip intake and the backlog of initial decisions has fallen for eight consecutive months. The backlog is now 75,680. We remain on course to clear the backlog down to frictional levels by spring 2001.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what contracts have been entered into with local authorities' regional consortia to provide accommodation for asylum seekers; how many units are to be provided by the regional consortia in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02; how the actual level of provision required differs from previous estimates given to local authorities; and if he will make a statement. [134866]

Mrs. Roche: Three contracts have been entered into by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) with Regional Consortia for provision of accommodation to asylum seekers. These are: with Glasgow City Council on behalf of the Scottish Consortium; with the North East Consortium; and with the Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium. The number of units that these contracts will provide is commercially confidential. During negotiations, the number of accommodation units to be provided under the contracts was discussed in the context of what was reasonable for Consortia to provide and what NASS's needs were likely to be.

The National Asylum Support Service recently revised some of the assumptions used to forecast accommodation requirements, based on its operational experience to date, with the result that the year's national forecast is now some 44,000 bedspaces rather than 65,000. That revision did not alter the number of accommodation units provided under either of the two contracts already signed (with Scotland and the North East) or the one that has just been signed (with the Yorkshire and Humberside Consortium).

Where it has not yet entered into contracts with Regional Consortia, NASS is taking the change in assumptions into account when continuing negotiations. NASS will not contract for more accommodation than it judges necessary.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to allow retailers to provide cash change to asylum seekers using vouchers; and if he will make a statement; [134672]

(2) if he will make a statement on the proposed review of the asylum seeker's voucher support system; what the terms of reference of the review are; who is undertaking the review; what the timescale of the review is; which individuals and organisations are being invited to make submissions on the voucher system; and if he will make a statement. [134671]

Mr. Straw: The Government's review of the operation of the voucher support system is being undertaken by the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green. It will include early consideration of how change and lower denomination vouchers can be issued in the context of the decisions made by Parliament and reflected in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. All relevant stakeholders and interested parties are to be invited to make representations. I will place in the Library of the House a list of those organisations which contribute to the review.

It is hoped to complete the review early next year and its conclusions will be reported to the House.

Police Officers (Overtime Payments)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review overtime payments to police officers; and if he will make a statement. [134859]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have no present plans to review overtime payments, but will be ready to consider any suggestions made by the Police Service, through the normal negotiating machinery, in the light of their views on changes necessary to enable the service most effectively to meet future demands.

Police Meetings

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he last met the President of the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Chairman of the Police Federation; what issues were discussed; if he will place a copy of the minutes in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [134850]

Mr. Straw: I last met the President of the Association of Chief Police Officers on 24 October and the Chairman of the Police Federation, with other representatives of the police services, on 9 October. A range of issues relating to policing were discussed. It has been the longstanding practice of successive administrations not to publish minutes of private meetings.

M16 Headquarters Attack

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police following the attack on M16 Headquarters; what actions have been taken to raise the level of security in London since the incident; and if he will make a statement. [134974]

Mr. Straw: I met with Sir John Stevens the following day (21 September). Considerable police resources have been dedicated to dealing with this very serious incident. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on particular security measures in place at any particular time. Security measures are kept under constant review by the authorities.

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walters) on 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 112W, if he will place in the Library copies of his correspondence since that date with the Committee on Standards in Public Life relating to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. [134854]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am unaware of any further correspondence with the Neill Committee relating to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill since the exchange of letters referred to in my answer to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) on 28 February.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans to make an order allowing the foreign funding of political parties and referendums in Northern Ireland under clause 65 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, once the Bill is enacted; and what estimate he has made of the amount of foreign funding that will be given in any one year to each party that currently fields candidates in elections in Northern Ireland. [134863]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is the Government's current intention to exercise the order-making power to clause 65 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill so as to disapply the provisions of Part IV of the Bill in respect of Northern Ireland parties for an initial period of four years. However, before coming to a final view on this matter the Government will undertake a further round of consultations with the main Northern Ireland parties.

The Government have made no estimate of the amount of foreign funding that will be given in any one year to parties contesting elections in Northern Ireland. In their evidence to the Neill Committee a number of Northern Ireland parties indicated that they had received donations from abroad.

Human Rights Act Leaflet

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost to public funds of the production of the leaflet "The Human Rights Act: An Introduction"; how many leaflets have been produced; how are they to be distributed; and if he will make a statement. [134869]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Two million copies of the leaflet have been produced, at a cost of £88,120. Copies have been provided free of charge to a range of advice centres, libraries and similar organisations across the United Kingdom. Members of the public can also obtain a free copy by calling a telephone response line. Already, since 1 October there have been over 18,000 such additional requests. People want to know what fundamental rights and freedoms are safeguarded by the Human Rights Act and it is clearly right that the Government should ensure that they can be informed.

Human Rights Act 1998

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost to public funds of the poetry competition for educational and other organisations conducted to mark the coming into force of the Human Rights Act 1998; how many institutions and organisations were asked to submit poems; how many persons in total are enrolled at the institutions and organisations contacted; how many poems were submitted; what the cost the public funds was of the advertisements containing the winning poems; and if he will make a statement. [134868]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The competition invited young people to explore the underlying principles of the Human Rights Act 1998 through the creative medium of their choice. It was managed on our behalf by the Citizenship Foundation, at a cost of £23,113. A total of 7,234 schools and youth groups were invited to participate, all of whom received an information pack about the competition and the Human Rights Act. 280 formal entries, involving over 1,000 young people, were received. These included poetry, drama, posters, collages, songs, board games and websites. The advertisements that used the winning poem cost £307,103 which also resulted in additional coverage by the media of the Human Rights Act launch. The standard of competition entries was high, and showed an impressive understanding by young people of the rights and responsibilities culture the Human Rights Act will help to develop. The competition as a whole played a valuable and successful part in our work to raise awareness of the Human Rights Act.

Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans in respect of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill. [134673]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill was defeated on Second Reading in the House of Lords on 28 September. The Government remain convinced that the courts, rather than defendants, are best qualified to reach a view on what is the right venue for trial, and intend to bring forward further legislation when parliamentary time allows.

Police Review

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review *(a)* the structure of the police service and *(b)* the Police Pension Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [134856]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There are no present plans to alter the structure of the police service, but we will be ready to consider any suggestions made by the police service in the light of their views on changes necessary to enable the service most effectively to meet future demands. Discussions will be held with representative policing bodies over coming months on a wide range of issues on the future of policing.

The Police Pension Scheme is currently under review.

EU Employment Directive

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many letters he has received alleging that there was a threat to religious freedom posed by the EU directive on employment agreed between the Governments of the EU on 17 October. [135066]

Mrs. Roche: The European Commission put forward a package of proposals under Article 13 of the Treaty of the European Community (EC) in November 1999. The package included two directives, one on racial discrimination in particular and one on discrimination in employment and training on a wider range of grounds: sexual orientation; religion; age; and disability. These have now been agreed between the Governments of the European Union.

The Home Office has received a total of 128 letters on the subject of the proposals as a whole. Officials have estimated that of these, 60 letters alleged that the EC Directive on employment posed a threat to religious freedom.

David Bennet Case

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he has made in the David Bennet case in Norwich. [134420]

Mr. Boateng: I understand that the inquest into the death still stands adjourned pending consideration of possible criminal proceedings.

Sussex Police

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of *(a)* police officers and *(b)* police constables in Sussex police on (i) 1 May 1997 and (ii) the most recent date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [134432]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on police numbers is collected twice a year, in March and September. The September 2000 figures will be published as soon as they have been received from all forces and validated.

The information on the Sussex police is set out in the table.

Sussex police

	31 March 1997	*31 March 2000*
Total number of police officers	3,085	2,822
Total number of constables	2,374	2,140

The reduction in police numbers during this period has been predominately due to the Chief Constable's decision to replace police officers in jobs that can be more effectively undertaken by civilian staff. Civilian staff numbers in March 2000 were 1,326—an increase of 179 since March 1997.

Animal Testing

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of progress in the co-ordination between the Department of Health, the Home Office, and the Department of Trade and Industry of a joint Government/industry message on the necessity for, and benefits of, animal testing. [134426]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government fully accept that the progress of scientific research; the development of new medical and veterinary drugs and technologies; and consumer and environmental safety continue to depend on the use of animals. Nevertheless, we are committed to ensuring that animals are used only where fully justified and where there are no alternatives. We will continue to work with the scientific community, industry and responsible animal welfare organisations to achieve this and to ensure that the costs and benefits of the use of animals in scientific research are fully explained.

The Home Office maintains a series of formal relationships with several sectors and interest groups as well as other Government Departments. We liaise with users and their professional bodies; with regulators in United Kingdom Government; and with industry (centering on the Association of British Pharmaceutical Industry).

Officials also liaise with grant awarding bodies such as the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust who are significant public sector research funding bodies and have established a set of principles which reflect the requirements of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986.

We work with the Regulatory Toxicology Group, including Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, DETR, Heath & Safety Executive and the DTI, which has led to the production of the new Regulatory Toxicology Guidance which is due to be published soon.

As a result of our setting up a data sharing working group, we have gained the endorsement of Government Departments of the principle of data sharing and agreement that United Kingdom regulatory agencies should encourage industry to extend the scope for sharing animal test data in the field of regulatory safety testing. An inter-Departmental concordat has therefore been developed as a first step in this process and should enable Government Departments to reduce the duplication of tests on animals.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to reduce *(a)* the number of experiments conducted on animals and *(b)* the number of animals used in experiments in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement; [134277]

(2) what plans he has to reduce the numbers of primates used in scientific procedures; and if he will make a statement; [134270]

(3) how much has been spent by his Department on work to find alternatives to the use of animals in scientific procedures in each of the last five years; what is the projected expenditure for each of the next two years; and if he will make a statement. [134269]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Non-human primates are used in regulatory testing to help ensure the safety of medicines and are also used for other important areas of fundamental research aimed primarily at better understanding the causes of disease in humans and developing potential new treatments. They contribute, for example, to programmes of work relating to Parkinson's disease, visual impairment, stroke, diabetes, disorders of reproduction and vaccine development. The 1986 Act requires that non-human primates are only used in scientific procedures if no other species is suitable.

In deciding whether to grant a licence for any regulated procedure, the 1986 Act requires that the likely benefits of the programme be weighed against the likely adverse effects on the animals concerned (the cost/benefit assessment) and that there are no alternatives which either replace animal use entirely, reduce the number of animals needed or refine the procedures to minimise suffering (the 3Rs). We must also be satisfied that the procedures are likely to achieve the stated objectives.

The 1986 Act does not make provision for controlling the overall number of procedures. While we can ensure that the number of animals used in each programme of work is minimised, we cannot dictate how many applications for new project licences will be submitted, nor how many will satisfy the requirements of the cost/benefit assessment.

The effectiveness of the Act cannot be judged by the overall number of procedures as the primary purpose of the Act is to reduce suffering.

In addition to the rigorous application of the 3Rs we have gained the endorsement of Government Departments of the principle of data sharing and agreement that United Kingdom regulatory agencies should encourage industry to extend the scope for sharing animal test data in the field of regulatory safety testing. An inter-Departmental concordat has therefore been developed as a first step in this process and should enable Government Departments to reduce the duplication of tests on animals.

The use of alternatives is already widely encouraged. Indeed, the use of animals in procedures is prohibited by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 in cases where a scientifically valid alternative is available. Each year the Home Office makes available to the Animal Procedures Committee a budget aimed at developing or promoting the use of alternatives which replace animal use, reduce the number of animals used or refine the procedures involved to minimise suffering. In each of the last five years, these budgets have totalled:

Year	*£000*
1995–96	253
1996–97	242
1997–98	182
1998–99	259
1999–2000	259

The budget for 2000–01 is £265,000. The budget for 2001–02 has not yet been set.

Lord-Lieutenants

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 7 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 355–56W, regarding lord-lieutenants, what expenditure was incurred by his Department in support of each lord lieutenant in the financial year 1999–2000. [134981]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Expenditure incurred by the Home Office in support of each lord lieutenant in the financial year 1999–2000 was:

	Expenditure
Counties	
Berkshire	3,659.04
Cambridgeshire	9,153.22
Cornwall	6,702.14
Devon	6,709.74
Dorset	781.84
East Sussex	4,327.75
Essex	475.47
Gloucestershire	4,305.94
Hampshire	20,239.20
Herefordshire	1,789.76
Hertfordshire	744.98
Isle of Wight	739.85
Kent	3,369.86
Lancashire	2,105.76
Lincolnshire	2,611.43
Norfolk	3,392.24
North Yorkshire	7,164.08
Nottingham	4,910.63
Northamptonshire	1,578.92
Oxfordshire	3,626.04
Rutland	594.19
Somerset	2,135.87
Staffordshire	4,081.33
Suffolk	1,833.68
Surrey	4,554.15
West Sussex	3,658.33
Wiltshire	2,402.38
Metropolitan	
Bristol	28,050.00
Durham	26,897.18
East Riding	17,620.00
Greater London	60,026.76
Greater Manchester	104,850.00
Merseyside	75,915.00
South Yorkshire	33,900.00
Tyne and Wear	63,180.00
West Midlands	101,599.00
West Yorkshire	62,000.00

Crime Initiatives (Builders)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what funding has been made available by his Department to projects in (1) England to combat incompetent and dishonest builders as part of crime initiatives; [134853]

(2) Leeds to combat incompetent and dishonest builders as part of crime initiatives, and in what form. [134852]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As part of the Reducing Burglary Initiative, the Home Office has provided funding for a project in Leeds which is primarily aimed at reducing

distraction burglary (burglary artifice). One element of the project, however, is the creation of a 'check-point' scheme which will contain a list of approved contractors who provide a reliable service at a reasonable cost. £131,000 has been identified specially for this element of the project.

Matters relating to the construction industry generally and moves to improve the service offered to the public by builders are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I support work currently being undertaken by his Department to tackle the problem.

Oakington Reception Centre

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), 14 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 292W, if he will provide a breakdown, by major category, of the weekly unit cost of housing an asylum seeker at Oakington reception centre *(a)* at present and *(b)* when the centre is operating at full capacity; and if he will provide a breakdown of the costs incurred in establishing Oakington reception centre. [134855]

Mrs. Roche: Oakington was set up in March 2000 with an initial capacity of 144 beds. Asylum seekers were taken in on a carefully phased programme. The set up costs to date amount to about £5 million and are expected to reach £6 million.

In September (the last full month for which figures are available), the average daily population was 101 and the weekly unit cost was £2,700. Occupancy has since increased rapidly and is now 176 resulting in a reduction in the unit cost which will continue to fall as the population increases to full capacity. When operating at full capacity, the cost would be £800 per person.

These figures are higher than those given in the reply to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 14 April. The first figure in that reply was based on the cost of an available space. It appears that the second figure may not have included all the costs of the establishment.

Police Reform

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the new agenda for reform of the police, discussed at his meeting with the Prime Minister on 26 June; and if it has been discussed with representatives of the police force. [134861]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Calls for a Royal Commission or reforms of policing by other means have come from a number of police sources. On 9 October, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, held a seminar with the leaders of the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Association of Police Authorities, the Police Superintendents' Association, the Police Federation and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. Its purpose was to identify the areas in which the police service itself felt there was a need for change and development to meet future requirements. Further discussions with police representative bodies will take place over coming months to explore in more detail a wide range of issues identified at the seminar. As was made clear to seminar participants, the Government have no pre-set agenda but are interested in making any improvements which will help achieve our objective of crime reduction.

Criminal Records

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when the criminal conviction certificate, criminal record certificate and enhanced criminal record certificate will be introduced; and if he will make a statement; [134473]

(2) what information from a person's criminal record will be disclosed on the enhanced criminal record certificate; and if he will make a statement; [134472]

(3) what information from a person's criminal record may be disclosed to potential employers and external immigration agencies; and if he will make a statement; [134474]

(4) what information from a person's criminal record will be disclosed on the criminal record certificate; and if he will make a statement; [134471]

(5) if a fixed penalty fine for a speeding offence will appear on the criminal conviction certificate, criminal record certificate and the enhanced criminal record certificate; and if he will make a statement. [134475]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Criminal Records Bureau will issue to individual applicants, on request, one or more of three different levels of certificate, according to the circumstances of the job or position in question:

A criminal conviction certificate (CCC), which will show all convictions which are not 'spent' under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974;

A criminal record certificate (CCC), which will contain details of both spent and unspent convictions, and cautions, reprimands and final warnings, recorded at national level and will be issued only where the job or position requires this level of disclosure;

An enhanced criminal record certificate (ECRC), which, in addition to the information in a criminal record certificate, will contain relevant information from local police records, and will be issued only where a further restricted group of particularly sensitive jobs or positions so require.

Data on convictions will, in the main, be drawn directly from the Police National Computer. Fixed penalties are not recorded there, but it is possible that the police might consider that information about such a case, drawn from local police records, was relevant to the job for which the person had applied and should be included in an ECRC.

The immigration authorities of overseas countries will be able to ask potential emigrants from Britain for a criminal conviction certificate, but the CRB will not provide criminal record certificates or enhanced criminal record certificates for emigration purposes, except in certain circumstances where it can be demonstrated that the emigrant is being considered for a post for which such certificates would be issued if it were in the United Kingdom.

Detailed planning is continuing, but at present it is expected that the CRB will begin issuing CRCs and ECRCs from around July 2001, and CCCs from around July 2002.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 30 October 2000

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Private Sector Secondments

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the private sector companies from which secondments have been made to her Department since June 1997. [133874]

Clare Short: Secondments from the following private sector companies have been made since June 1997:

Cisco Systems

Marconi

Virgin

Natural Resources Institute (University of Greenwich).

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Court

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Solicitor-General what plans he has to review the operation of plea bargaining in the Crown Court. [134730]

The Solicitor-General: The Code for Crown Prosecutors provides guidance to Crown Prosecutors on a range of casework issues, including the acceptance of guilty pleas. Defendants may want to plead guilty to some, but not all charges. Alternatively, defendants may want to plead guilty to a different, possibly less serious charge. The Code states that, in these circumstances, Crown Prosecutors should accept a defendant's guilty plea only if they think that the court is able to pass a sentence that matches the seriousness of the offending. The Code also states that Crown Prosecutors should never accept a guilty plea just because it is convenient. The Code is a public document, issued under section 10 of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985 by the Director of Public Prosecutions. It was re-issued in a revised form earlier this month after an extensive public consultation exercise and a copy has been placed in the Library.

The Court of Appeal gave judgment on 16 October 2000 in a Reference by the Attorney-General of a sentence passed on Robin Peverett for offences of indecent assault. The Attorney-General has said that in the light of that judgment he will consider, with the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Director of the Serious Fraud Office, whether additional guidance should be issued on the acceptance of guilty pleas at the Crown Court.

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General what assessment he has made of the *(a)* resources and *(b)* quality of the staff of the Crown Prosecution Service. [134784]

The Solicitor-General: The resource position for the CPS has been challenging since 1994–95 but the SR2000 settlement was a good one. As a result the CPS budget in 2003–04 will be 8 per cent. higher in real terms than in this year. This is on top of the additional funding of £15.8 million for 2000–01 announced on 26 June 2000.

The quality of staff is assessed by the CPS through the performance appraisal system, whereby staff are assessed individually against the performance standard appropriate to their job. The quality of staff is also benchmarked externally by involving staff outside the Service in recruitment panels and in opening up selection exercises to outside competition. I have been impressed on my frequent visits to CPS offices around the country by the commitment and professionalism of staff.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement concerning the Commission for Racial Equality's investigation into allegations of race discrimination in the Croydon branch of the CPS. [134333]

The Solicitor-General: The Commission for Racial Equality announced its decision to conduct an investigation into allegations of race discrimination in the Croydon Branch on 28 July 2000.

The Commission and the Crown Prosecution Service met on 28 September to discuss the way in which the investigation was to be carried out.

Following that meeting, on 3 October the Crown Prosecution Service received a request from the Commission for detailed information on the Croydon Branch to be sent to the Commission by 27 October. This information was forwarded to the CRE on 26 October.

The investigation is ongoing.

Serious Fraud Office

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the work of the Serious Fraud Office. [134406]

The Solicitor-General: The Serious Fraud Office currently has a case load of 73 serious and complex fraud cases, including appeals. In the year to date some 22 defendants have been convicted, out of 27 tried. In addition, six trials are under way involving 15 defendants. The Serious Fraud Office continues to be an effective force in the fight against fraud.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Postal Workers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effect of the Working Time Directive on the opportunities for postal workers to earn overtime payments. [134377]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Working Time Regulations, which implement the provisions of the European Working Time Directive, are designed to protect employees from being required to work over a 48 hour week on average,

but allow them to opt-out of this protection if they wish. This individual opt-out is reviewable by the EU Commission in 2003.

Overtime payments are a contractual matter.

Electricity Trading Arrangements

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the current timetable is for the implementation of the new electricity trading arrangements in England and Wales. [135878]

Mrs. Liddell: Ofgem announced on Friday the revised timetable for the implementation of the new electricity trading arrangements. The planned implementation date is 27 March 2001 but, due to the complexity of the work to be undertaken by a large number of participants, this date will be subject to confirmation early in the new year.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry's intention to lift the stricter consents policy in November remains unchanged.

Telecommunications

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what evaluation his Department has undertaken of the effect of the EU Telecommunications Regulation concerning unbundling of the local loop on the UK telecommunications industry. [135666]

Ms Hewitt: A Regulatory Impact Assessment on the costs and benefits of the draft Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on unbundled access to the local loop is currently being prepared.

Local Loop Unbundling has already been mandated in the UK. Oftel decided in November 1999 that BT should allow operators to access its local access lines, and a condition in BT's licence requiring it to provide unbundled local loops was put in place in April 2000 and brought into force on 8 August 2000—four months ahead of the deadline in the Regulation. BT started the process of accepting orders for co-location in its exchanges in September and the first loops should be available early in 2001. This progress means the UK is well placed in Europe in the introduction of local loop unbundling, which will promote competition in the provision of broadband and other communications services to consumers and small businesses.

The Regulation also requires the introduction of shared access, where the incumbent operator continues to provide telephony while an alternative operator provides a broadband service over the same line. While shared access is not yet in place in the UK (nor is it widely available elsewhere in Europe), Oftel has already proposed its introduction in a consultation document "Access to bandwidth: Shared access to the local loop" published in October 2000. Oftel's proposal is in line with the Regulation.

The overall effect of the Regulation in the UK will thus be to underpin the existing regime, which will bring significant benefits to the telecommunications industry and consumers as a whole. The Regulation will also enable UK industry to reap similar benefits elsewhere in Europe by creating a harmonised framework for local loop unbundling.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt) of 24 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 106–07W, concerning the telecommunications council, what the Government's policy was towards the Commission's postal services proposal; and if he will make a statement. [135744]

Ms Hewitt: For the UK, I said that we strongly supported further liberalisation of postal services in Europe compatible with the maintenance of the universal service. We recognised that this was an increasingly global market and that postal services within the EU needed greater commercial freedom if they were to become global players. Liberalisation should proceed in a way consistent with our social objectives so as to allow the full benefits of competition to be achieved for all consumers. At the moment, and subject to the content of the package as a whole, our view was that a reduction of the reserved area to 150grams was achievable without putting the universal service at risk. We would need to consider the advice of the new UK postal regulator on whether a greater reduction could be achieved without putting at risk the universal service at a uniform tariff. However, we would play a constructive role in further discussions on the proposal reflecting the new regulator's advice.

Banana Trade Dispute

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) of 24 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 101W, on the banana trade dispute, what the obstacles to compensation are; and how they are affected by World Trade Organisation membership. [135793]

Mr. Caborn: Any compensation scheme for companies affected by the banana dispute would raise a number of questions concerning compatibility with both the WTO Agreement on Subsidies and EC state aid rules. There is a significant risk that a scheme would be incompatible with these. As I pointed out in my earlier answer, the only way to alleviate this burden from all the companies facing US sanctions is to find a solution to the banana dispute that is satisfactory to all parties. It is precisely this that the Government have been working hard to achieve since the US first imposed retaliation last year.

No other European State is running a scheme to assist its own industries affected by the dispute. Several posts have reported that their hosts have looked into such a possibility and have concluded that any scheme would fall foul of these rules.

Coal Authority

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the quinquennial review of the Coal Authority will take place; and what the terms of reference of the review will be. [135862]

Mrs. Liddell: Work has now commenced on the second quinquennial review of the functions and organisation of the Coal Authority. The terms of reference for the review are as given.

Overall Aim

To determine whether any changes are necessary to the functions and organisation of the Coal Authority.

First Stage: Prior Options

To examine whether the Coal Authority should be retained as an NDPB and, if so, should continue to carry out some or all of the functions it presently delivers.

In the course of this, to consider specifically:

whether an NDPB is the best way of meeting DTI objectives in this area and the Authority's past performance in doing so;

whether the role and functions of the Coal Authority contribute to the delivery of wider DTI and Government objectives;

whether existing functions still need to be undertaken or reduced and whether new functions could usefully be undertaken by the Authority;

whether there is potential for closer working with other parts of the public sector, or the private sector, on particular activities, including possible transfer of activities to or from those bodies;

how functions can best be delivered and whether there is scope for other organisational options, including discontinuing, contracting-out, market-testing, merging or rationalising, privatising, or restructuring internally, some or all of them;

whether the statutory framework within which the Authority operates is appropriate or whether changes to its powers would be desirable;

whether the funding regime within which the Authority operates is appropriate or whether changes (commensurate with public accountability) would improve the ability of the Authority to carry out its functions.

Second Stage: Review of Efficiency

If NDPB status for the Coal Authority is confirmed, in the light of the findings of the Prior Options Stage consider how the Authority's operations, services and functions could be provided and operated more efficiently and effectively in the future.

To consider particularly:

the Authority's aims and objectives and the part they play in delivering wider DTI and Government objectives;

performance targets and whether they are sufficiently comprehensive and stretching, and properly reflect the Authority's aims and objectives;

how the Authority can improve its responsiveness to those who use its services and functions and the involvement of its staff in the way it works;

whether the Authority's organisational structure and effectiveness, its staffing, management and personnel policies adequately take into account changes in workload;

opportunities for joint-working with other bodies to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery;

whether the Authority can make better use of new technology to improve the delivery of its services and functions;

the Authority's system of financial management and control together with the budgetary process and the application of fees and charges;

existing outsourcing arrangements and confirm that they are providing value for money. In particular, to advise on whether the boundary between in-house and outsourced work is appropriately drawn in all areas including that of monitoring work on subsidence and historic liabilities;

whether there is scope to increase the current level of efficiency savings and income and to improve the utilisation of its assets;

whether the Authority needs different freedoms or flexibilities to improve delivery of its services;

whether the roles and reporting arrangements of the Authority, the Department and Ministers need clearer definition and whether they provide proper support for operational and policy work.

The findings of this review will be summarised in a report in a format agreed with the Department, including a set of recommendations.

The first stage of the review will be carried out by an official in the Department of Trade and Industry. If, once this stage is completed, it is decided to proceed to a second stage, it is likely that this work will be undertaken by consultants. The first stage should be completed by the end of 2000 and stage two would commence early in 2001. The review is being overseen by a Steering Group chaired by the Director of Coal Unit in my Department. The team includes the Chairman of the Coal Authority and an independent member.

My Department is particularly keen to hear the views of interested parties including suggestions for improvement in the provision of services. Any comments, which should be sent by 30 November, should be addressed to Mr. Brian Morris, Department of Trade and Industry, Bay 179, 1 Victoria Street London, SW1H 0ET (e-mail: brian.morris@dti.gsi.gov.uk).

Universal Bank

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the Government's progress in creating the universal bank; and if he will make a statement. [135561]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Post Office and the high street banks are continuing to work together to develop the concept of universal banking services and the Government are closely monitoring developments.

Sub Post Offices

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many sub post offices closed between May 1997 and the latest available date. [135557]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that the net number of sub post office closures since end March 1997 to end September 2000 is 1,183.

Parental Leave

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to reform the current provisions relating to parental leave. [135560]

Mr. Alan Johnson: On 22 June I announced the terms of reference for a review of maternity pay and parental leave. This is looking at the steps needed to make sure that parents have choices to help them balance the needs of their work and their children, so that they may contribute fully to the competitiveness and productivity of the modern economy. The provision and impact of parental leave is key to this work.

Ministers working on the review have participated in a series of roundtable discussions across the English regions, Wales and Scotland. This gave over 250 individuals and organisations the opportunity to put forward their views on what is needed to change. All the comments and suggestions expressed are now being considered with the aim of publishing a consultation document before Christmas.

Private Recruitment Industry

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact on labour market flexibility of *(a)* IR35 and *(b)* current reform of regulation of the private recruitment industry. [135562]

Mr. Alan Johnson: We do not expect the IR35 legislation to have a material effect on labour market flexibility. Our proposals to reform the regulations governing the private recruitment industry will increase labour market flexibility. A revised regulatory impact assessment will be published at the time the regulations are laid before Parliament.

Offshore Wind Projects

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if capital expenditure funded to the extent of 40 per cent. by capital grants for offshore wind projects will be eligible for capital allowances *(a)* on the full expenditure and *(b)* on only the expenditure not funded by Government grant. [135054]

Mrs. Liddell: A firm would be able to claim capital allowances only on the expenditure not funded by Government grant.

UK Coal Operating Aid Scheme

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications have been received under the UK Coal Operating Aid Scheme. [135051]

Mrs. Liddell: By Wednesday 25 October, applications had been received by the DTI in respect of the listed eight production units:

Scottish Coal/Longannet

Hatfield

RJB/Selby Complex

Blenkinsopp

RJB/Harworth

RJB/Maltby

RJB/Rossington

RJB/Welbeck.

An up-to-date list of applications is given on the DTI web site at: http://www2.dti.gov.uk/support/appaid.htm

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish the Statutory Instrument on the UK Coal Operating Aid Scheme. [135052]

Mrs. Liddell: A Statutory Instrument on the UK Coal Operating Aid Scheme will not be required.

Copies of the scheme are available in the House Library, or on the DTI website at the following address: http://www2.dti.gov.uk/support/coal.htm.

Under the provisions of the Industrial Development Act the excess of any payment of aid over £10 million will require authorisation by a resolution of the Commons. We are waiting for the European Commission's approval of our Coal Operating Aid Scheme. If such approval is granted, we will then seek any necessary Commons authorisation.

Renewables Obligation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what period the proposed Renewables Obligation buy-out price of 3p/KWh will be maintained. [135057]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government propose that the Renewables Obligation will extend to 31 March 2026, and that the 3p/KWh level of the buy-out price will not be reduced throughout that time in order to ensure that there is a secure basis for long-term investment. The Government also propose to link the buy-out to the Retail Prices Index. The Government's proposals are subject to the outcome of the current consultation.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he notified the European Commission about the Renewables Obligation; and when he anticipates receiving approval. [135056]

Mrs. Liddell: The European Commission was formally notified of the Renewables Obligation in July 2000. My Department is currently in discussion with the Commission on the details of the notification.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research underlies his forecast for the level of greenhouse gas emissions after 2000. [135055]

Ms Hewitt: At a broad level, the DTI is responsible for projections of energy demand which are used to project carbon dioxide emissions, while the DETR and MAFF have responsibility for projections of other greenhouse gases.

Projections of carbon dioxide emissions are based on the energy demand projections which are generated by the DTI's energy model, which has been developed through extensive research over many years. The approach taken to modelling energy demand is described in chapter 2 of a working paper made available in March this year. A copy of the working paper, entitled "Energy Projections for the UK", is available in the Library of the House. The DETR also funds extensive research into carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions from specific sectors such as non-domestic buildings, manufacturing industry and road transport to help inform Government projections.

Methods for projecting emissions of the other greenhouse gases (methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulphur hexafluoride) have been developed by DETR and MAFF based on many years of Government funded research. The projections were updated recently by independent consultants for inclusion in the draft Climate Change Programme and provided as a working paper entitled "Projections of Non-CO2 Greenhouse Gases For The United Kingdom", March 2000, WS Atkins Limited, also available in the Library of the House.

Cowboy Builders

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what projects his Department is supporting connected with the First Check Point organisation to combat incompetent and dishonest builders. [135429]

Dr. Howells: My Department is not supporting any projects connected with the first check point organisation.

Romania

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received on the decision not to extend export credit guarantee cover to Romania; if he will review this decision; and if he will make a statement. [135556]

Mr. Caborn: A number of exporters have made representations about the provision of export credit guarantees to support potential business in Romania. ECGD has reached its exposure ceiling for Romania. They expect to carry out a review shortly to determine the acceptability of making more cover available in the light of Romania's political and economic situation.

Bilateral Concordat

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to publish the bilateral concordat between his Department and the Northern Ireland Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. [135865]

Mr. Byers: The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I have today agreed the text of the Concordat between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Copies of the Concordat have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and the text will be made available on the Department of Trade and Industry web-site.

Part-time Working Directive

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made in discussions within the EU on securing equal treatment for agency workers under the part-time working directive. [135709]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand that the Social Partners have held three meetings to date to discuss a possible framework agreement covering agency workers. The European directive on part-time work of 1997 was implemented in the UK through the Part-Time Workers (Prevention of less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2000, in July this year. These regulations give protection to all workers, including agency workers, against less favourable treatment on the grounds that they work part-time.

Asteroids

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) when he will announce the next steps the Government plan to take to address the threat of cosmic impact; and if he will make a statement; [135476]

(2) what assessment he has made of the findings of the report of the Taskforce on near-earth objects; and if he will make a statement. [135475]

Ms Hewitt: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 9W.

Near Earth Objects

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will discuss with the Prime Minister the possibility of including the threat of Near Earth Objects at a future meeting of the G8 leaders; and if he will make a statement. [135477]

Ms Hewitt: Officials are consulting widely with interested parties and authorities in many countries about the issues raised by the report of the Task Force on Near Earth Objects. I have not discussed with the Prime Minister the possibility of raising this issue with G8 leaders.

Deregulation

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make available the evidence upon which the statement on his Department's website, concerning the impact of action taken by the Government to reduce the burdens on business caused by regulation, was based; and if he will quantify the reduction in the burdens on business caused by regulation referred to in that statement. [R] [135664]

Ms Hewitt: My Department has been unable to identify the statement referred to in this question. Regulatory Impact Assessments, which are prepared for all new regulations with cost impacts on business, quantify the anticipated cost burden or saving of individual measures. Copies of these are available in the House of Commons Library.

Silicosis Claims

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) how many silicosis cases *(a)* have been processed to date and *(b)* are still outstanding; and what assessment he has made of the length of time needed to complete all the outstanding silicosis claims; [135543]

(2) what action his Department is taking to speed up the process of settling outstanding silicosis compensation claims. [135544]

Mrs. Liddell: Since assuming the former British Coal's health liabilities in January 1998 the Department has received no claims for silicosis.

Bujagali Dam, Uganda

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment the ECGD has made of the proposed Bujagali Dam in Uganda. [135112]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD cover is not currently available for Uganda, although a review is due soon. ECGD has not been asked to undertake an assessment of the proposed Bujagali Dam project.

International Atomic Energy Agency

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on matters discussed and decisions taken at the International Atomic Energy Agency annual conference in September, in so far as they affect the United Kingdom; and if he will place relevant documentation in the Library. [135439]

Dr. Howells: The UK delegation to the 44th General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) played a full and active part during the conference. The UK was involved in the drafting and submission by the European Union of resolutions covering strengthening the effectiveness and improving the efficiency of the safeguards system and application of the model protocol, measures against illicit trafficking in nuclear materials and other radioactive sources and the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolutions relating to Iraq. These draft resolutions were in some cases amended in negotiation with other delegations, but all were eventually adopted. The UK delegation also participated fully in discussions concerning other resolutions and decisions of the conference.

A copy of the document produced by the IAEA containing resolutions and other decisions of the General Conference will be placed in the Library of the House when it becomes available.

Dounreay

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the total expenditure on fast reactor research and development at Dounreay from the inception of the Fast Reactor Programme until its closure; and what is his estimate of the likely costs of decommissioning the Dounreay site to greenfield conditions. [135437]

Mrs. Liddell: I understand from UKAEA that in 1990, towards the end of the UK Fast Reactor research and development programme, the total investment in the programme over 30 years was estimated to be £4 billion (undiscounted, in 1988 prices). This figure includes design and development for the programme at Risley and other sites as well as at Dounreay.

The cost of decommissioning and restoring the Dounreay site is estimated to be in the region of £4 billion (undiscounted, in 1999–2000 prices) over a 50–60 year timescale.

Ex-miners Compensation Claims

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if interest will be paid to ex-miners suffering from respiratory diseases and claiming compensation, following delays in payment, in addition to the compensation paid. [135118]

Mrs. Liddell: Under the Claims Handling Agreement, signed by the Department and the Solicitors acting for the claimants, interest on general damages is payable from the date of the receipt of the letter of claim. On special damages, interest is payable from either the date the loss occurred, or in some cases the date of receipt of the letter of claim. Loss of earnings are calculated at the appropriate Court rate, and other heads of special damages are calculated at a reduced rate, reflecting the fact that these are assessed at present day values. All interest runs to the date an offer is accepted.

"Bankruptcy—A Fresh Start"

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he hopes to publish the results of his consultation on Bankruptcy: a Fresh Start and his conclusions on those representations. [135375]

Dr. Howells: We expect to receive a report on the public consultation on "Bankruptcy—A Fresh Start" and on the emerging issues in the near future. We will then consider the desirability of a further round of consultation on some of the specific issues identified in the consultation document.

Fuel Prices

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what powers he *(a)* has and *(b)* intends to seek to control the retail prices of petrol and diesel; [134398]

(2) what powers he *(a)* has and *(b)* intends to seek to ensure that oil producers and retailers pass on in full to consumers reductions in taxes on petrol and diesel. [134457]

Mrs. Liddell: Section 1(4) of the Energy Act 1976 confers power on the Secretary of State to regulate by order the price at which petroleum products (including petrol and diesel) may be supplied.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State does not intend to seek further powers.

The Government believe that open competition provides consumers with supplies at the best available prices.

Gas (Rural Communities)

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the regulatory framework in relation to the supply of mains gas to rural communities. [134728]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government recognise the importance of gas supplies to rural areas and are looking to the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority to be proactive in securing the widest viable coverage.

In addition, the Government have just amended the regulatory framework in the Utilities Act 2000 to remove the geographical exclusivity of Public Gas Transporters. This should make it easier for those in rural communities to obtain a connection by stimulating competition between PGTs and exerting a downward pressure on connection costs.

Later in the year, the Government will be taking two further steps with relevance to rural consumers and others. These are the publication, under the Utilities Act, of draft guidance to the new Gas and Electricity Markets Authority on social and environmental policies, and publication of a consultation document on UK Fuel Poverty Strategy.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with representatives of the gas industry with a view to facilitating the supply of mains gas to rural communities. [134998]

Mrs. Liddell: Extensions to the gas network are a matter for the independent regulator, the Director General of Gas Supply.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Terrorist Incidents

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* punishment beatings, *(b)* punishment shootings and *(c)* murders there were in Northern Ireland in (i) each week and (ii) each quarter (1) from 1 January to 30 September and (2) in October, indicating for each week and quarter how many of those crimes were committed by (x) Republican groups and (y) Loyalist groups. [134296]

Mr. Ingram: The tables show the number of casualties as a result of paramilitary style shootings and attacks, recorded by week and quarter of occurrence during the period 1 January to 18 October 2000, together with the number of deaths recorded as being due to the security situation in Northern Ireland by week of occurrence:

Casualties as a result of paramilitary style shootings/assaults for Northern Ireland (by week of occurrence) 1 January-18 October 2000

	Shootings		*Assaults*	
Date range	*By Loyalist*	*By Republican*	*By Loyalist*	*By Republican*
1 January-7 January 2000	1	—	2	—
8 January-14 January 2000	—	—	3	—
15 January-21 January 2000	2	—	—	—
22 January-28 January 2000	—	—	2	1
29 January-4 February 2000	1	—	4	—
5 February-11 February 2000	1	—	—	1
12 February-18 February 2000	—	—	1	—
19 February-25 February 2000	1	—	1	2
26 February-3 March 2000	4	—	1	—
4 March-10 March 2000	—	1	1	—
11 March-17 March 2000	4	4	1	2
18 March-24 March 2000	2	—	2	1
25 March-31 March 2000	2	1	3	1
1 April-7 April 2000	—	3	—	2
8 April-14 April 2000	—	5	2	2
15 April-21 April 2000	—	1	1	1
22 April-28 April 2000	5	—	2	3
29 April-5 May 2000	3	4	2	—
6 May-12 May 2000	5	—	2	2
13 May-19 May 2000	1	—	2	3
20 May-26 May 2000	1	1	—	3
27 May-2 June 2000	—	—	2	—
3 June-9 June 2000	—	1	—	1
10 June-16 June 2000	3	—	4	1
17 June-23 June 2000	2	1	2	2
24 June-30 June 2000	1	1	—	—
1 July-7 July 2000	7	1	—	1
8 July-14 July 2000	3	—	1	1
15 July-21 July 2000	1	1	1	—
22 July-28 July 2000	1	—	1	2
29 July-4 August 2000	2	—	3	1
5 August-11 August 2000	1	—	3	—
12 August-18 August 2000	—	2	3	—
19 August-25 August 2000	—	—	1	1
26 August-1 September 2000	3	4	1	1
2 September-8 September 2000	—	2	3	—
9 September-15 September 2000	6	—	—	2
16 September-22 September 2000	—	—	2	2
23 September-29 September 2000	2	3	—	1
30 September-6 October 2000	5	2	—	1
7 October-13 October 2000	2	1	1	1
14 October-18 October 2000	2	—	1	2
Totals	74	39	61	44

Casualties as a result of paramilitary style shootings/assaults for Northern Ireland (by quarter) 1 January-18 October 2000

	Shootings		*Assaults*	
Date range	*By Loyalist*	*By Republican*	*By Loyalist*	*By Republican*
January-March	18	6	21	8
April-June	21	17	19	20
July-September	26	13	19	13
Totals	65	36	59	41
1-18 October[1]	9	3	2	3

[1] Provisional

Deaths due to the security situation for Northern Ireland (by week of occurrence) 1 January-18 October 2000

Date range	*By Loyalist*	*By Republican*
8 January-14 January 2000	1	—
19 February-25 February 2000	2	—
20 May-26 May 2000	1	—
27 May-2 June 2000	—	1
8 July-14 July 2000	1	—
19 August-25 August 2000	3	—
23 September-29 September 2000	—	1
7 October-13 October 2000	—	1
Totals	8	3

Note:

Statistics may be subject to some slight amendment

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Agriculture Council

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the outcome was of the Agriculture Council held in Luxembourg on 23 and 24 October; and if he will make a statement. [135652]

Ms Quin: I attended the Agriculture Council meeting in Luxembourg on 23 October.

The Council warmly welcomed a commitment from Commissioner Fischler to table proposals simplifying the administration of the CAP. This followed a UK/French initiative responding to concerns by farmers about unnecessarily bureaucratic regulation and recommendations by the Red Tape Review team looking at implementation of IACS. The Commission also stated that it recognised the importance of traditional landscape features, such as hedges, in implementing schemes.

The Council held first discussions on proposals to reform the fruit and vegetables, rice and sugar regimes. On fruit and vegetables I welcomed the proposed simplification of the regime, particularly in relation to the funding of producer organisations. On rice, I stressed the importance of securing an outcome that safeguarded the interests of UK consumers, avoided problems in the WTO and for third country suppliers, and took account of the environmental aspects of rice growing in certain EU regions. I expressed disappointment that the Commission proposal for reform of the sugar regime was not more radical, particularly in view of the pressures from enlargement and from WTO developments. I nevertheless welcomed the proposed extension of sugar quotas for only two years to enable studies to be undertaken to inform a full review in 2002.

The Council will consider these proposals further at future meetings.

The Council also heard a report from Commissioner Fischler on developments in the WTO agriculture negotiations and a call from the Danish Minister to develop initiatives on organic agriculture, which was widely supported.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Pleospora Papaveravea

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what conditions will be imposed on use of the results produced by the United Nations Drugs Control Programme research into Pleospora Papaveravea; and if he will make a statement. [135150]

Mr. Battle: If the results of the United Nations Drug Control Programme's (UNDCP) research proves that Pleospora Papaveracea can be used for the eradication of illicit opium poppy cultivation without damage to human health or the environment, UNDCP would decide on sharing these results with its member countries. The decision on whether or not to use Pleospora Papaveracea for eradication would be for the governments of the countries where there is such illicit cultivation.

Cuba

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when representations were first made to the Cuban authorities about access to the arrested United Kingdom citizens in Cuba. [135657]

Mr. Hain: Our Embassy in Havana made representations to the Cuban authorities about access as soon as they were informed of the arrest on 9 October and continue to do so subsequently.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the travel advice for Cuba was last amended; and what plans he has to amend it following the arrest of United Kingdom citizens in Cuba. [135658]

Mr. Hain: FCO travel advice for Cuba was updated on 4 October 2000. It is kept under constant review. We are not planning to revise it in light of the recent arrests. British nationals travelling to Cuba who comply with the local law and are holding the correct documentation should have no cause for concern.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date, at what time and by whom Ministers in his Department were first informed of the arrest of United Kingdom citizens in Cuba; and which Minister in his Department was first informed. [135656]

Mr. Hain: Ministers were aware of the arrest of the British nationals on 24 October from media reporting. It is not normal practice for FCO officials to inform Ministers whenever a British national is arrested overseas.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice in relation to the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to EU participation in WTO proceedings; [135280]

(2) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to policies towards self-employed people (Article 47(2)); [135323]

(3) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to measures on refugees and displaced persons (Articles 63(2)(a) and (b)); [135318]

(4) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to economic and financial co-operation with third countries (New Article 181a); [135298]

(5) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to *(a)* tax measures for the protection of the environment (Article 93(4)) and *(b)* provisions for mutual assistance between tax authorities (Article 93(5)); [135288]

(6) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to measures setting out conditions for freedom of travel for nationals of third countries (Article 62(3)); [135320]

(7) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to immigration policy (Article 63(3)(a) and (b)); [135317]

(8) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to environmental matters (Article 175 (2)); [135297]

(9) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to *(a)* the approval of the rules of procedure of the Court of Auditors (Article 274(3)) and *(b)* the appointment of Members of the Court of Auditors Article (247(3)); [135291]

(10) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice in relation to the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to international agreements on intellectual property (Article 133(1)); [135281]

(11) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to social security (Article 42); [135324]

(12) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to anti-discrimination measures (Article 13); [135313]

(13) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to minimum requirements in certain social areas (Article 137 (1)); [135289]

(14) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to judicial cooperation for the internal market (Article 65(a), (b) and (c)); [135283]

(15) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to CFSP/JHA international agreements (Article 24); [135314]

(16) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the list of products which are connected with the production of or trade in weapons (Article 296 (2)); [135308]

(17) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to association of overseas territories (Article 187); [135296]

(18) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to asylum measures (Articles 631a to d); [135319]

(19) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to association agreements (Article 300 (2)); [135307]

(20) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the creation of a Cohesion Fund (Article 161); [135299]

(21) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to measures to control the supply of certain products in difficulties (Article 100 (1)); [135290]

(22) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to social security for migrant workers (Article 144); [135304]

(23) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the Court of Justice in Title IV (Article 67(5)); [135285]

(24) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to measures in the cultural field (Article 151 (5)); [135303]

(25) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the conclusion of mixed agreements (new Article 300 (8)); [135306]

(26) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to measures in the industrial sphere (Article 157(3)); [135302]

(27) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the appointment of *(a)* the Deputy Secretary General and *(b)* the Secretary General of the Council (Article 207(2)); [135292]

(28) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the appointment of members of the Economic and Social Committee (Article 259(1)); [135311]

(29) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to approximation of laws for the Common Market (Article 94); [135305]

(30) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to specific action for economic and social cohesion (Article 159); [135301]

(31) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the Statute of MEPs (Article 190(5)); [135295]

(32) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to transport regulation (Articles 71(2) and 80); [135286]

(33) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to rules for structural funds (Article 161); [135300]

(34) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to financial regulations for accounting officers (Article 279(1); [135309]

(35) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to rules on visas (Articles 62(2) b(ii) and (iv)); [135321]

(36) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the rules of procedure of the European Court of First Instance (Article 224); [135293]

(37) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to tax measures to prevent fraud, tax evasion and circumvention of rules (Article 93(2)); [135287]

(38) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to rules and arrangements for border checks (Article 62(2)a); [135322]

(39) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the establishment of agencies (New Article 256a); [135316]

(40) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the movement of citizens between member states (Article 18); [135312]

(41) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the choice of Common Foreign and Security Policy representatives (Article 23(2)); [135315]

(42) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to appointments to the Committee of the Regions (Article 263); [135310]

(43) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to the rules of procedure of the European Court of Justice (Article 223); [135294]

(44) if he will make a statement on his policy to be adopted at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to cooperation measures under Title IV (Article 66); [135284]

(45) if he will make a statement on the policy he will adopt at Nice on the proposed change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in relation to community financial aid to a Member State (Article 100(2)). [135478]

Mr. Vaz: We have set out our overall policy to the IGC negotiations which will be concluded at Nice in a White Paper published in February this year. We have made it clear that where the extension of qualified majority voting is in the United Kingdom's national interest, we will support it strongly; and that where it is not we will oppose it firmly.

BBC World Service

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the BBC World Service. [135905]

Mr. Hain: The BBC has today announced that the BBC World Service will move from Bush House to Broadcasting House at the end of 2006. We welcome and endorse this decision, about which we have been kept fully informed.

We are confident that the World Service will maintain in Broadcasting House the standards and traditions that have made it the world's best known and most respected voice in international broadcasting. The new location will be better suited than Bush House to enable the World Service to meet the challenges of the digital age—for which the Government made available an additional £64 million in the recent Spending Review—and to work to maximum effect with key BBC partners.

It also offers better value for money than remaining at Bush House.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Office Furniture

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what the cost is of *(a)* four two-drawer pedestal units and *(b)* a four-drawer filing cabinet specified for use in Portcullis House; who took the decision that only the former could be made available in hon. Members' offices in Portcullis House; what surveys have been conducted on hon. Members' preferences for methods of storage of files. [134261]

Sir Sydney Chapman: One of the responsibilities of the Select Committee is to consider the requirements of hon. Members as construction projects are progressed. In developing the proposals for the fitting out of the offices in Portcullis House, the Committee was aware of the ever-growing demand for both work surfaces and storage space in the offices of hon. Members and their staff. It

concluded, therefore, that after the basic provision of storage and filing space in the wall cupboards, the most effective use of the available floor space would be achieved by providing flexible two and three drawer pedestals that could be housed under the workbenches. The matter of cost was not, therefore, a factor in our deliberations.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mrs. Lait: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what plans he has to offer House staff a stakeholder pension. [134375]

Mr. Kirkwood: As required under the legislation, from October 2001, designated stakeholder pension arrangements will be made available to all House of Commons Staff who cannot be covered by the House of Commons Staff Pension Scheme (HOCSPS). Stakeholder pension arrangements will also be made available to House of Commons Staff who are covered by the HOCSPS but who earn less than £30,000 a year, and who wish to top up their HOCSPS benefits.

These arrangements will be for new House staff and existing House staff.

New Members

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what arrangements she intends to make for the induction of new hon. Members in the next Parliament. [134463]

Mrs. Roe: Arrangements, similar to those introduced for hon. Members newly elected in 1997, are in hand. A Co-ordinating Group, with a membership drawn from across the departments of the House and reporting to the Board of Management, is responsible for planning and overseeing the induction of newly elected Members of Parliament. Assisting the Co-ordinating Group are three groups responsible for the listed tasks:

planning and overseeing the making of a new Parliamentary Video, which presents a brief introduction to the House of Commons service;

planning a Reception area for new Members to visit on their arrival; and

co-ordinating the revision of the Members' Handbook.

I know that departments of the House will also make arrangements to make newly elected hon. Members aware of the services that they provide.

Dissolution (Administrative Arrangements)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what plans she has to advise hon. Members of the administrative arrangements for their staff and offices consequent upon Parliament's dissolution. [134462]

Mrs. Roe: A notice reminding all hon. Members of the regulations applied to them and their staff during a Dissolution of Parliament will be issued by the Serjeant at Arms. The Accountant will be writing also to every hon. Member with detailed information concerning their allowances and entitlements.

Late-night Sittings

Mr. Bercow: To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the proposals by the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons to reduce the number of late-night sittings of the House. [134580]

Mrs. Beckett: The objective of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons is to improve the efficient working of the House of Commons.

Programming legislation and the deferral of late divisions should assist hon. Members, both by giving increasing certainty about the business and reducing the number of late sittings. I expect the House will have an opportunity to consider the proposals in the near future.

Recess Dates

Mr. MacShane: To ask the President of the Council if she will announce provisionally the recess dates for the next 15 months. [135077]

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid I am unable to do so since the dates of adjournments depend on the progress of business.

Cost Allowance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the President of the Council what the total provision was for the additional cost allowance for hon. Members for the year 1999–2000; and what actual expenditure was during that year. [134573]

Mrs. Beckett: The total provision for the additional cost allowance for hon. Members for the year 1999–2000 was £8,272,000.

The actual expenditure during 1999–2000 was £7,740,000.

HEALTH

Porton Products Ltd.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what products of SAMR and Porton Products have had agreements to market and distribute since 1980; to whom they were marketed and distributed; and if he will make a statement. [134132]

Yvette Cooper: The Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research (CAMR) has been the executive arm of a special health authority, the Microbiological Research Authority, since April 1994. Prior to that date, it was part of the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS). CAMR had a distributorship and marketing agreement with a private sector company, Porton Products Ltd., from April 1985 to October 1998 (at which time the term of the agreement ended). The range of products covered by the agreement included frozen bacterial cell pastes, enzymes and proteins, vaccines and therapeutic toxins. A full list will be deposited in the Library.

Porton Products distributed CAMR products to a range of healthcare customers worldwide. Porton Products was purchased by a French company, the Beaufour Ipsen Group, in 1994. Beaufour Ipsen may be able to provide the hon. Member with information relating to the customers for these products.

CAMR has only two current licence agreements with Beaufour Ipsen. These are for Dysport (a botulinum toxin-based therapeutic used in the treatment of cerebral palsy), and Erwinase (an enzyme used in the treatment of childhood leukaemia).

Waiting List Statistics

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients were waiting for in-patient treatment for *(a)* cancer, *(b)* heart disease and *(c)* HIV and hepatitis in each of the last 10 years in (i) Taunton constituency and (ii) Somerset Health Authority. [134315]

Mr. Denham: The numbers of patients from Somerset Health Authority waiting for inpatient treatment at 31 March in the specialities Cardiothoracic surgery and Cardiology are shown in the table. This information was not collected prior to march 1994. It is not possible to provide the information at a constituency level.

Information on inpatient waiting times is collected by consultant speciality. Treatment for cancer, HIV and hepatitis is carried out in a number of specialities and the numbers waiting for treatment are therefore not identifiable separately.

Total inpatient waiting list for specialties cardiothoracic surgery and cardiology[1]

Year	Cardiothoracic surgery	Cardiology
March 1994	104	0
March 1995	84	27
March 1996	118	86
March 1997	148	119
March 1998	105	105
March 1999	179	137
March 2000	236	228

[1] Somerset HA (1997–2000)
[2] Somerset DHA (1994–1996)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many out-patients were waiting for treatment for more than six months in each of the last 10 years in *(a)* the Taunton constituency and *(b)* Somerset Health Authority. [134316]

Mr. Denham: The numbers of patients from Somerset Health Authority waiting more than twenty six weeks for an outpatient appointment are shown in the table. This information was not collected prior to March 1998. It is not possible to provide the information at a constituency level.

Outpatients still waiting 26 plus weeks

Year	Somerset HA
March 1998	566
March 1999	1,068
March 2000	1,149

Source:
QM08, QM08R quarterly returns

Patient Advocacy and Liaison Service

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if staff employed by the proposed Patient Advocacy and Liaison Service will be represented on the patient forums; and if he will make a statement. [134341]

Ms Stuart: Chapter 10 of the National Health Service Plan states that half the membership of Patients Fora will be randomly drawn from respondents to trusts' annual patient surveys. The other half of the membership will comprise representatives of local patient groups and voluntary organisations.

At the moment, we are conducting a major exercise to take the views of stakeholder groups nationally and locally on the specific details of how the new arrangements set out in Chapter 10 of the NHS Plan should be set up and co-ordinated in practice. Exactly how the membership of Patients Fora will be constructed, and which local patient representative group will be involved, will be resolved as part of this exercise. A clear statement on the outcome of the exercise will be given in the new year.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many victims of domestic violence have been treated in hospitals in England and Wales in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [134749]

Mr. Denham: The table shows a count of in-patient episodes of care where the nature of injury has been specified as maltreatment by spouse or partner. The figures provided are for National Health Service Hospitals in England, for the years 1995–96 to 1998–99.

Information available on the total number of patients attending accident and emergency departments and the number of patients attending outpatient clinics for each consultant speciality. The reason patients attend accident and emergency departments or outpatient clinics is not available.

Count of finished consultant episodes (FCEs) where the cause of injury is maltreatment by spouse or partner—NHS Hospitals, England—1995–96 and 1998–99

	Male	Female
1995–96	14	95
1996–97	16	78
1997–98	9	76
1998–99	12	94

Notes:
1. An FCE is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant in one health care provider. The figures do not represent the number of patients, as one person may have several episodes within the year.
2. Data in this table are adjusted for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data, except for 1998–99 which is not yet adjusted for shortfalls.
Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics (HES), Department of Health.

Hospital Staff (Assaults)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many alcohol-related assaults on staff have taken place in hospitals in England and Wales in each of the last three years. [134750]

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many incidents of drug-related assaults on staff were recorded in each of the past three years. [134957]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service Executive conducted a survey of violence in National Health Service trusts in England in 1998–99. The survey found that, on average, seven violent incidents were recorded each month per 1,000 staff. This is equivalent to approximately 65,000 violent incidents against NHS trust staff each year. The survey did not reveal the causes of violent incidents. This information will be held locally by individual National Health Service employers through local reporting procedures and identified through appropriate risk assessment measures. The information would be reflected in local prevention and reduction strategies. Details of the survey can be found in Health Service Circular 1999/229: 'Managing Violence, Accidents and Sickness Absence in the NHS', copies of which are available in the Library.

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people living in the UK are receiving hospital treatment for HIV/AIDS; and if he will make statement. [134816]

Yvette Cooper: The number of people with HIV/AIDS receiving treatment within the National Health Service in England in the calendar year 1999 was 20,765, adjusted for under reporting. Information relating to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are matters for the devolved administrations.

Fluoridation

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend fluoridation of drinking water; and if he will make a statement. [134359]

Yvette Cooper: We will be discussing the systematic review of water fluoridation produced by the University of York with representatives of the water industry. We will also be encouraging health authorities with high levels of dental decay to consider fluoridating their water as part of their overall oral health strategy. The report of the evidence review will help ensure that local decisions are based on an authoritative, readily accessible summary of research into the safety and efficacy of water fluoridation.

Medical Laboratory Scientific Officers

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if Medical Laboratory Scientific Officers will be included in the Pay Review Body; and if he will make a statement. [134364]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin) on 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 80–81W.

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the pay levels of Medical Laboratory Scientific Officers for the next three years. [134382]

Mr. Denham: Above inflation pay increases were agreed for Medical Laboratory Scientific Officers as part of a three-year pay deal covering the years 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02. For 2001–02 this deal provides for a minimum pay rise of RPIX at December 2000 plus 0.5 per cent., subject to progress on negotiations with the trade unions on proposals for modernising the National Health Service pay system. Future arrangements for determining pay and conditions of service for Medical Laboratory Scientific Officers and other NHS staff will be the subject of those negotiations.

Larval Therapy

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines he issues to health authorities concerning the use of maggots in larval therapy; what estimate he has made of the level of demand among GPs for maggot treatment for their patients; and if he will make a statement. [134349]

Mr. Denham: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 84–85W.

NHS Funding (West Midlands)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much additional capital has been allocated to the West Midlands Region as part of the national bidding process; and how much each NHS trust has obtained through that process for each national priority scheme in the current financial year. [134720]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

£000

Authority	*Pathology MF*	*Renal MF*	*Action on cataracts*	*Waiting times*	*Additional waiting times*	*Dental access centres*	*Ambulance response times*	*CHD MF*	*NHS Direct*	*Total*
Birmingham Heartlands	968	400	120	720	298	—	—	160	—	2,666
Birmingham Women's Healthcare	127	—	—	395	—	—	—	—	—	522
Birmingham Specialist Community	—	—	—	—	5	—	—	—	—	5
Black Country Mental Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Burton Hospitals	—	—	—	75	—	—	—	191	—	266
Birmingham Children's Hospital	450	—	—	358	—	—	—	—	—	808
City Hospital	—	—	—	75	214	—	—	286	—	575
Coventry Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Dudley Priority Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
First Community	—	—	—	—	—	626	—	—	—	626
Good Hope Hospital	—	—	—	770	116	—	—	190	—	1,076
Hereford and Worcester Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	—	—	83	—	—	83
Hereford Hospitals	—	—	66	62	—	—	—	28	—	156
Herefordshire Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Mid Staffordshire General Hospitals	—	—	414	391	147	—	—	122	—	1,074

£000

Authority	Pathology MF	Renal MF	Action on cataracts	Waiting times	Additional waiting times	Dental access centres	Ambulance response times	CHD MF	NHS Direct	Total
N. Staffordshire Combined Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	364	—	110	—	474
North Staffs Hospitals	—	—	235	690	25	—	—	—	—	950
North Warwickshire Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Northern Birmingham Mental Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Premier Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
R. Jones and A. Hunt Orthopaedic and District Hospital	—	—	—	250	—	—	—	—	—	250
Royal Orthopaedic Hospital	—	—	—	200	—	—	—	—	—	200
Royal Shrewsbury Hospitals	—	—	—	312	—	—	—	4	—	316
S. Warwickshire Combined	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Sandwell Healthcare	—	—	120	290	—	—	—	75	—	485
Shropshire Community and Mental Health	—	—	—	427	—	—	55	—	—	482
Solihull Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
South Warwickshire General Hospitals	—	—	201	—	—	—	—	52	—	253
Southern Birmingham Mental Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Staffordshire Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
The Dudley Group of Hospitals	—	—	120	644	—	—	—	20	—	784
The Foundation	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
The George Eliot Hospital	—	—	207	307	40	—	—	87	—	641
The Princess Royal Hospital	—	—	—	693	—	—	—	10	—	703
The Royal Wolverhampton Hospitals	—	—	—	439	124	—	—	150	—	713
University Hospital	—	—	400	1,833	—	—	—	—	—	2,233
Walsall Hospitals	—	—	—	270	340	—	—	184	—	794
Walsall Community Health Services	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Walsgrave Hospitals	—	200	222	719	—	—	—	252	—	1,393
Warwickshire Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	—	—	27	—	—	27
West Midlands Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	—	65	68	—	400	533
Wolverhampton Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Worcester Acute Worcestershire Community Healthcare	—	635	—	180	—	—	—	—	—	815
Supported by RO block	—	−84	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	−84
Awaiting allocation to Trusts	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1,381	—	1,381
Total	1,545	1,151	2,105	10,100	1,309	1,055	233	3,302	400	21,200

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the block allocation is for discretionary capital to each NHS trust in the West Midlands in the current financial year. [134719]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

£000

Trust	Baseline discretionary block 2000–01	Non-recurring addition to block 2000–01	Total discretionary block 2000–01
Birmingham Heartlands	5,525	1,430	6,955
Birmingham Women's Health Care	1,160	300	1,460
Birmingham Specialist Community	1,795	470	2,265
Black Country MH	360	90	450
Burton Hospitals	2,325	600	2,925
Children's Hospital	1,745	450	2,195
City Hospital	2,975	770	3,745
Coventry Healthcare	310	80	390
Dudley Priority Health	785	200	985
First Community	260	70	330
Good Hope Hospital	2,075	540	2,615
Hereford and Worcester Ambulance Service	460	120	580
Hereford Hospitals	825	210	1,035
Herefordshire Community Health	360	90	450
Mid Staffordshire General Hospitals	2,425	630	3,055
North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare	1,525	400	1,925
North Staffs Hospitals	5,425	1,410	6,835
North Warwickshire Healthcare	850	220	1,070
Northern Birmingham Mental Health	760	200	960
Premier Health	1,210	310	1,520
Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic and District Hospital	1,060	270	1,330
Royal Orthopaedic Hospital	460	120	580
Royal Shrewsbury Hospitals	1,900	490	2,390
South Warwickshire Combined	760	200	960
Sandwell Healthcare	2,525	650	3,175
Shropshire Community and Mental Health	1,325	340	1,665
Solihull Healthcare	410	110	520

£000

Trust	Baseline discretionary block 2000–01	Non-recurring addition to block 2000–01	Total discretionary block 2000–01
South Warwickshire General Hospitals	1,625	420	2,045
Southern Birmingham Mental Health	950	250	1,200
Staffordshire Ambulance Service	810	210	1,020
The Dudley Group of Hospitals	3,325	860	4,185
The Foundation	360	—	360
The George Eliot Hospital	1,485	390	1,875
The Princess Royal Hospital	1,410	370	1,780
The Royal Wolverhampton Hospitals	4,025	1,040	5,065
University Hospital	5,425	1,410	6,835
Walsall Hospitals	2,625	680	3,305
Walsall Community Health Services	510	130	640
Walsgrave Hospitals	5,475	1,420	6,895
Warwickshire Ambulance Service	310	80	390
West Midlands Ambulance Service	1,560	400	1,960
Wolverhampton Healthcare	710	180	890
Worcester Acute	3,350	870	4,220
Worcestershire Community Healthcare	1,550	400	1,950
Total	77,100	19,880	96,980

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the minimum and maximum times are for a business case submitted by an NHS trust in *(a)* the West Midlands Regional Office and *(b)* England and Wales to receive funding, differentiating between PFI and non-PFI schemes. [134721]

Mr. Denham: The timetables for the submission of outline business cases (and initial strategic outline cases for major schemes) are decided on a case by case basis by National Health Service Executive regional offices. If approved to test for funding options (public capital or the private finance initiative) then NHS guidance gives indicative timetables for major and non-major schemes for the preparation and approval of the full business case.

Children's Services

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish new guidance for planning children's services. [134402]

Mr. Hutton: Draft new guidance on planning services for vulnerable children was issued for consultation in April 2000. The broad thrust of the guidance that planning for vulnerable children should be conducted by the whole Council with Health and other partners was welcomed. We are now working with the Children and Young People's Unit and others to produce non-statutory "good practice" guidance on planning children's services as soon as possible.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to offer NHS employees a stakeholder pension. [134373]

Mr. Denham: We expect that National Health Service employers will be exempt from the requirement to provide Stakeholder Pensions. The NHS already has an excellent occupational pension scheme. However, scheme members, earning £30,000 or less, will be eligible to make concurrent contributions to both the NHS pension scheme and a stakeholder pension scheme of their choice. We will encourage NHS employers to facilitate this through payroll deductions.

Drug Users

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the proportion of hard-drug users who began by using soft drugs. [134956]

Yvette Cooper: This information is not collected centrally. However, research shows that virtually all young heroin users have used other drugs earlier in their lives. Research also shows that almost all young heroin users have been regular heavy smokers.

Mixed-sex Wards

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the hospitals in England and Wales which have eliminated mixed-sex wards since May 1997; [134952]

(2) by what date all remaining mixed-sex wards in National Health Service hospitals will be phased out. [134953]

Mr. Denham: At the moment, information on which hospitals in England have eliminated mixed sex accommodation is not available, as data are collected on a health authority basis. However, the National Health Service Executive is currently undertaking a monitoring exercise to find out which NHS trusts have achieved our objectives in this area and what remains to be done in those places which have not. The results of the monitoring results will be available in due course.

Matters for Wales are for the devolved administration.

Hospitals (Building Costs)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average overall cost is of building *(a)* a community hospital and *(b)* a general hospital. [134955]

Mr. Denham: Each hospital development is unique, reflecting local requirements and circumstances. We are therefore unable to give an average overall cost. The capital value would be dependent on many factors, such as location, with the land and construction costs varying considerably, with inner London prices at over 25 per cent. higher than in many other parts of the country. Other factors include the geography and nature of the site chosen, and whether it is new build on an existing hospital site, a greenfield site or a major refurbishment project.

NHS Direct

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the reduction of burdens on other parts of the National Health Service since the introduction of National Health Service Direct. [134958]

Ms Stuart: NHS Direct has not been set up to merely reduce demand on other health services. It is about making sure that patients get to the right service at the right time, and giving people re-assuring clinical advice so that they can look after themselves if that is the appropriate thing to do.

Sheffield University's 2nd independent report on NHS Direct reconfirmed the levels of patient satisfaction and suggested that the introduction of NHS Direct was associated with halting an upward trend in demand for out-of-hours general practice.

Data from those NHS Direct sites that handle calls on behalf of a general practitioner co-operatives also show that NHS Direct has been able to reduce demand on out-of-hours services. NHS Direct routinely handles 50 per cent. of calls to GP Co-operatives without the need to refer patients to the out-of-hours doctor.

Feeding Stuffs Regulations

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the new feeding stuffs regulations. [134787]

Ms Stuart: The Feeding Stuffs Regulations 2000 for England have been made and came into force on 29 October 2000. The Regulations incorporate a number of European Commission Directives covering the labelling of feed materials and feed additives and improved procedures for the authorisation of new additives. The status of additives, such as vitamins and trace elements, used outside of feeding stuffs has not been changed by this legislation. Discussions are currently taking place with the European Commission on the best way to control this long standing practice, which occurs in all member states, without adversely affecting the welfare of farm animals.

Hospital Services (Worcestershire)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the implications for hospital services in the county of the projected overspend of Worcestershire County Council's Social Services Department. [134476]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* Worcestershire Health Authority, Acute Trust and Social Services Department are working hard to address any potential risks to hospital services arising from the social services overspend.

The acute trust has reported that there are currently fewer patients awaiting discharge than earlier in the year as a result of improved use of community beds and social services support. Health and social services are working together on any residual risk to ensure their winter plans meet demand over the winter. Social services have reinstated a number of care packages for the elderly.

£1 million was transferred from county council to the adult services budget following committee approval in September, to reduce hospital delayed transfers. Additional winter funding of £550,000 has been allocated to Worcestershire Health Authority, and is also targeted at delayed transfers.

Prescriptions

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what sanctions are available under the prescribing incentive scheme for use against a practice which fails to meet the budget for prescribing set by the Primary Care Group; and what rights of appeal there are against such sanctions. [135729]

Mr. Denham: The Statutory arrangements for prescribing incentive schemes make no provision for imposing sanctions.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will set out in respect of each general practitioner practice within the North East Dorset Primary Care Group *(a)* the prescribing budget, *(b)* the indicative amount for prescribing under section 18(1) of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 and *(c)* the target budget for prescribing calculated in accordance with the prescribing incentive schemes directions 1998 and 2000 for the years (i) 1998–99, (ii) 1999–2000 and (iii) 2000–01; [135707]

(2) if he will set out in respect of each general practitioner practice within the Christchurch Primary Care Group *(a)* the prescribing budget, *(b)* the indicative amount for prescribing under section 18(1) of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 and *(c)* the target budget for prescribing calculated in accordance with the prescribing incentive schemes directions 1998 and 2000 for the years (i) 1998–99, (ii) 1999–00 and (iii) 2000–01; [135705]

(3) what payments have been made to practices within the Christchurch and North East Dorset primary care groups under prescribing incentive schemes. [135704]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not collected by the Department. The hon. Member may wish to contact Major General Richard Keightley CB, Chair of Dorset Health Authority for information on this subject.

Primary Care Investment Plans

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library copies of the current primary care investment plans for each primary care group in Dorset. [135708]

Mr. Denham: The information requested will be placed in the Library.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many patients were registered in *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000 and *(c)* 2000–01 with each GP practice within the North East Dorset Primary Care Group; and what proportion of patients are of pensionable age in each case; [135726]

(2) how many patients were registered in *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000 and *(c)* 2000–01 with each GP practice within the Christchurch Primary Care Group; and what proportion of patients are of pensionable age in each case. [135727]

Mr. Denham: The number of patients registered with general practitioner practices in Dorset Health Authority in 1998–99 and in Christchurch and North East Dorset Primary Care Groups in 2000 is shown in the table. It is not possible to provide the information on an individual partnership basis or to identify the number of female patients aged 60 to 65.

Patients of Unrestricted Principals and Equivalents[1] aged 65 plus within Dorset HA for 1 October 1998 and 1999 and selected Primary Care Groups at 1 October 1999

	Total	*Aged 65 plus*
1998		
Dorset Health Authority	707,128	155,219
Number of partnerships in Dorset HA	108	—
1999		
Dorset Health Authority	701,763	153,540
Number of partnerships in Dorset HA	110	—
1999—Primary Care Groups		
Christchurch PCG	50,985	14,409
North East Dorset PCG	64,389	16,398
Number of partnerships:		
Christchurch PCG	8	—
North East Dorset PCG	10	—

[1] UPEs include Unrestricted Principals, PMS Contracted GPs and PMS Salaried GPs.

Source:

Department of Health General and Personal Medical Services Statistics.

Tuberculosis

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of TB have been recorded in South Shields in each of the last five years. [135276]

Yvette Cooper: Data on the number of cases of tuberculosis, notifiable under the Public Health (Infectious Diseases) Regulations 1988, are recorded under local authority area only. The number of notifications for the period 1995 to 1999 for the South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council area are shown in the table.

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Tuberculosis—all reports	14	24	15	15	11
Respiratory	11	14	9	15	11
Non-respiratory	3	10	6	0	0

Cancer Research

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the new NHS Cancer Research Network. [135799]

Yvette Cooper: A review of cancer research priorities undertaken by the Department in 1999 identified support for the infrastructure for clinical cancer research as the highest priority. We responded to this need in The National Health Service Plan by committing funds for development of a NHS Cancer Research Network (NCRN) across England. By 2003 we will be investing an additional £20 million each year in this new initiative.

The NCRN will provide a world class infrastructure for the conduct of clinical trials and other well designed research. Its initial aim is to double the total proportion of adult cancer patients entering trials within three years. It will be a managed research network mapping onto the cancer service networks across the country. It will provide dedicated research nurses, data managers, medical staff sessions and information systems needed for high quality clinical research, together with research support for radiology, pathology, pharmacy and radiotherapy. The quality, speed and co-ordination of clinical research will be enhanced and research will be better integrated with cancer care.

The first step in establishing the NCRN is to commission a Co-ordinating Centre. This process is well advanced and we hope to make an announcement soon.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent developments there have been in his policy on research into prostate cancer; how much money is being spent by his Department on screening and research programmes targeted at prostate cancer; and how such programmes will benefit the people of the West Midlands and Coventry. [135798]

Yvette Cooper: The National Health Service Plan and the NHS prostate cancer programme outline our policy of a progressive increase in the resources from the Department devoted to prostate cancer. This will result in the expenditure this year of £1.2 million rising to £4.2 million in 2003–04.

This year we are investing in a study of the most effective treatment of patients who are screening test positive, a new method of diagnosis and treatment of early prostate cancer, a collection of 300 prostate cancer tumour samples as source material for researchers and a study of the current extent of screening in the United Kingdom. The next meeting of the Cancer Research Funders Forum will discuss the creation of centres of excellence for prostate cancer research in which the Department is ready to invest. The Medical Research Council is currently considering a proposal for a trial of prostate cancer screening and we will know the outcome in four to six weeks. The benefits of all this research and any policies that develop from it will be available to everyone in England.

Resuscitation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what time scale he has set for chief executives of

hospitals to implement local resuscitation policies which take account of patients' rights; and if he will make a statement; [135716]

(2) what guidance he has issued following recommendations from the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing and the Resuscitation Council (UK) concerning patient involvement in resuscitation decisions; and if he will make a statement. [135717]

Yvette Cooper: On 5 September, the Department issued a Health Service Circular Resuscitation Policy (HSC2000/28) to National Health Service trust chief executives which makes clear that patients' rights are central to decision-making on resuscitation.

The circular asks chief executives to ensure that appropriate resuscitation policies—which respects patients' rights—are in place, understood by all relevant staff, accessible to those who need them, and that such policies are subject to appropriate audit and monitoring arrangements.

As stated in the NHS Plan, hospitals are to have resuscitation policies in place by April 2001.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department since 1999 in reducing sickness absence; what targets he has agreed with the Cabinet Office; and if he will make a statement. [135464]

Ms Stuart: The Cabinet Office prepares each year an annual report of sickness absence in the Civil Service which includes information for each department. The report for 1999 is currently being finalised and will be published soon.

Details of the Department's targets for reduced sickness absence for the years 2001 and 2003 against a baseline year of 1998 will be included in its Service Delivery Agreement. This is also to be published shortly.

Tumour Operations

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average waiting time was at University Hospital, Birmingham for operations to remove a tumour in each of the last two years; and if he will make a statement. [135071]

Mr. Denham: Waiting list statistics are not recorded by specific clinical condition, rather by specialty. It is therefore not feasible to produce statistics for operations to remove tumours. Depending on the nature of the tumour (malignant/benign), the location of the tumour and the size of the tumour, the clinical priority on the waiting list for that patient can be different, with urgent cases treated before non-urgent.

Generally, the trust is well on target to achieve its end of year in-patient waiting list position.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent contacts his Department has had with University Hospital, Birmingham, over the waiting list for operations for the removal of a tumour; and if he will make a statement. [135070]

Mr. Denham: The West Midlands Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive holds regular review meetings with all acute trusts, including University Hospital Birmingham, where general waiting lists are discussed. The Trust is well on target to achieve its end of year in-patient waiting list position.

We are committed through the NHS Plan to cutting the maximum waiting time for in-patient treatment from 18 months now to six months by 2005. Latest figures show that around 70 per cent. of in-patients are seen within three months of going on a waiting list.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will make a statement on the ways in which patient groups can play a greater role in explaining the benefits of animal experiments; [134178]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 13 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 683W, on labelling, what plans he has to introduce a system of labelling of medicines to indicate they have been tested on animals; and if he will make a statement. [131976]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 24 October 2000]:* My noble Friend, The Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, explained to my hon. Friend on 25 July that we fully support the need to raise public awareness of the benefits of animal testing. The Medical Research Council has recently published a booklet, "Mice and Medicine", on animal experiments and medical advances, copies of which are available in the Library. The joint industry/Government Pharmaceutical Industry Competitiveness Task Force is also considering the wider issue as part of its work on animal research. We also will be examining what enhanced role patient groups can play in raising public awareness in this area.

In view of these developments, and for reasons explained in the answers given on 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 760W, 5 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 509W and 3 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 170W, we have no plans to introduce a labelling system for medicines to indicate they have been tested on animals. Such a system would require an amendment to European law and, even if permitted, there will not be the space on most labels to explain the necessity for animal testing in the interests of protection of public health.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Government Actuary Report

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when his Department asked the Government Actuary for a report on linking benefits to earnings. [135267]

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he has received the Government Actuary's report under section 36 of the Child Support and Social Security Act; when he intends to lay it before Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [135450]

Mr. Rooker: The Government Actuary is finalising his report under section 36 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000. It will be published when it is completed.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have contacted the minimum income guarantee helpline since the new advertising campaign began; how many application forms have been sent out to people who have telephoned the helpline; how many application forms have been returned; how many people have had their minimum income guarantee payments increased after returning a completed application form; how many people are in receipt of minimum income guarantee for the first time as a result of returning a completed application form; and if, pursuant to his written answer to the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), of 14 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 654W, he will provide this information broken down into five year age bands. [134779]

Mr. Bayley: Around 60,000 claim forms have been returned. Around half of the claim forms that have already been processed have been successful and these claimants are now receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what proportion of pensioners in Wales who could be entitled to receive the Minimum Income Guarantee have not made a claim; [135152]

(2) how many pensioners in Wales who could be entitled to receive the Minimum Income Guarantee have not made a claim. [135151]

Mr. Bayley: We estimate that about 500,000 pensioners could be missing out on their entitlement within Great Britain. Because of the method a separate figure is not available for Wales.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in receipt of the Minimum Income Guarantee have savings below £3,000 which are currently disregarded. [134556]

Mr. Bayley: Currently, 1.46 million pensioners in receipt of the Minimum Income Guarantee have declared they hold capital below £3,000. From next April, the lower capital limit will be increased to £6,000. That will benefit some 70,000 pensioners who will not have any of their savings taken into account.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, for pensioners in receipt of the Minimum Income Guarantee, the rate of interest assumed on savings of £3,000 to £8,000 in £1,000 bands, incorporating the effect of disregarding the first £3,000 of savings. [134555]

Mr. Bayley: The basis for the Department's calculation of tariff income in the income-related benefits, with a system of graduated deductions between lower and higher limits, was established with the introduction of Income Support in 1988. It was not intended to represent any return that could be obtained from investing capital and hence is not based on any particular rate of return. A tariff income of £1 per week is assumed for each £250, or part thereof, held between the appropriate lower and upper limits[1].

[1]£3,000 and £8,000 in Income Support, Minimum Income Guarantee and income based Jobseeker's Allowance; except in residential care home and nursing home cases where the limits are £10,000 and £16,000; and Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit where the limits are £3,000 and £16,000. From next April, these limits will be increased to £6,000 and £12,000.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he plans to carry out of *(a)* the performance of local authorities in the administration of Housing Benefit and *(b)* the commitments in each authority's Best Value performance plan. [134578]

Angela Eagle: We are determined to drive up the standards of Housing Benefit administration and have introduced a number of initiatives, like Best Value and the Verification Framework, which are designed to promote improved performance. We have a number of measures in place to monitor closely the progress authorities are making towards better service delivery.

The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate has an ongoing programme of inspection of Housing Benefit administration and reports on the performance of each of the local authorities it inspects. As at 27 October 2000, and since its inception in 1998, the Inspectorate has completed and published reports of 72 inspections. A further 47 inspections are in progress or planned.

With the introduction of Best Value, from April this year, the Inspectorate will also carry out inspections which will consider whether local authorities are complying with the requirements of the Best Value framework. In addition, a number of Best Value performance indicators relating to Housing Benefit have been introduced. These will allow us to assess how well authorities are carrying out their benefit administration and whether they are delivering the continuous improvement which Best Value requires.

Best Value also requires each local authority to publish an annual performance plan in which they must set themselves realistic, but challenging, targets for improvement. Auditors review whether the plans have been prepared and published in accordance with the statutory guidance and whether the systems in place are adequate for producing accurate information. Where they are concerned about a performance plan, the auditors can recommend that a Best Value inspection is undertaken.

Further measures will be kept under review.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the deductibles affecting a person's entitlement to Housing Benefit. [134650]

Angela Eagle: There are a number of safeguards in place to prevent Housing Benefit from meeting the full contactual rent where it is excessive or includes charges for services that do not relate to the provision of adequate accommodation. In addition Housing Benefit is an income-related benefit, and entitlement therefore takes account of other income available to those claiming it. The principal restrictions on Housing Benefit entitlement are:

Ineligible service charges:

These are any element of rent or compulsory charges, included in the rent, for services that do not relate to the provision of adequate accommodation. They are listed in schedule 1 to the Housing Benefit (General) Regulations 1987 (as amended).

Rent restrictions:

Claims received from those in the private rented sector will generally be referred to the local Rent Officer by the local authority for a rental valuation to determine the Housing Benefit claim. The functions to be carried out by the Rent Officer in making and notifying his determination to the local authority are set out in the Rent Officers (Housing Benefit Functions) Order 1997 as amended by the Rent Officer (Housing Benefit Functions) (amendment) Order 2000.

Other deductions:

Excess income: Where a person's income is higher than the applicable amount, benefit is reduced by a fixed taper of 65 pence for every pound of additional income over the applicable amount.

Non-Dependant deduction: Deductions in respect of non-dependant members of a tenant's household are made at nationally set standard rates, depending on their age, circumstances and income.

Overpayment deduction: An overpayment of Housing Benefit may be recovered from benefit at a standard rate laid down in legislation.

Pension-sharing

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate the Government have made of the likely number of pension-sharing orders that will be made *(a)* in the financial year 2000–01 and *(b)* the following financial year. [134645]

Mr. Rooker: Pension-sharing will provide a fair option for divorcing couples who wish to share their pension rights. However, it is up to the courts and divorcing couples to decide what use they make of this option.

The number of pension-sharing orders in the current financial year is likely to be negligible. Best estimates for the year 2001–02 are that about 20,000 pension-sharing orders may have been made by the end of that financial year, but this will depend on judicial decisions.

Notes:

1. Pension-sharing is available from 1 December. By the end of the financial year 2000–01, it will therefore only have been in place for four months.

2. The estimate for the year 2001–02 is based on figures contained in Regulatory Impact Assessment for pension-sharing reproduced as part of the Regulatory Impact Assessment for the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act, DSS, 1999.

3. The original estimate in the Regulatory Impact Assessment has been updated using the latest estimate for divorces in the UK derived from the ONS Statistics (1998) for England and Wales and from the Annual Report of the Registrar (1998) for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Pensions Policy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on (1) measures for increased co-operation in pensions matters at EU level in the context of Com (2000) 622 which it is his policy to support; [134801]

(2) the implications of Com (2000) 622 for UK pensions policy. [134802]

Mr. Rooker: We welcome the steps the Commission is taking to encourage co-operative exchange on the sustainability of pension systems. We will take this opportunity to underline the major advantages of the UK pensions model and of our approach to pension reform.

Pension Credit

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the consultation document on pensioners' credit. [135062]

Mr. Rooker: The Pension Credit consultation paper will be published in the next few weeks.

Private Sector Pensions

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of private sector organisations had some form of pension provision in each year since 1990 on the same basis as Table 2.5 of Department of Social Security Research report No. 123. [135266]

Mr. Rooker: I regret the information is not available as it was not collected prior to 1996.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action the Financial Services Authority is taking against personal pension schemes that have been labelled stakeholder-friendly that do not conform with the requirements of the scheme. [134647]

Mr. Rooker: The Financial Services Authority continues to monitor "stakeholder friendly" advertisements and reviews the selling of personal pensions as part of its ongoing supervision of firms. Clearly it is not right for consumers to be misled into thinking that a personal pension meets all the prospective stakeholder standards if it does not.

Providers should satisfy themselves that they are acting in compliance with the guidance on the selling of personal pensions issued in October of last year by the Financial Services Authority.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate the Government have made of the likely share of the pension market that will be taken by stakeholder pensions. [134559]

Mr. Rooker: What share of the pensions market that will be taken by stakeholder pensions will depend on the marketing of stakeholder pensions by providers and on individual choices by savers.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many employees of the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority will be responsible for checking that the administration of stakeholder pensions meets the conditions laid down in the relevant regulations. [134528]

Mr. Rooker: The Authority currently has a small team working full-time on the registration of stakeholder pension schemes and developing regulatory procedures, together with a number of staff who work partly on the stakeholder pensions project alongside other duties. The Authority has not yet determined how many staff will be employed on stakeholder pensions once schemes begin operating. That will depend on the total number of schemes which are registered, the number of reported breaches, and the approach the Authority decides to take in fulfilling its regulatory responsibilities.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what checks will be made to ensure the stakeholder pension schemes keep to the 1 per cent. administration charge limit; and how frequently these checks will be made. [134529]

Mr. Rooker: The Stakeholder Pension Scheme Regulations 2000 (SI 1403) require the trustees or managers of schemes to make a written statement at least once a year, describing the scheme's compliance with the regulations which impose limits on the amount of charges and the manner in which charges may be made. Schemes must also appoint a reporting accountant and obtain the reporting accountant's opinion on the statement. We are in discussions with representatives of the accountancy profession on the form of the reporting accountant's opinion.

The Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority (Opra) will be responsible for regulating compliance with the conditions for registration as a stakeholder scheme, including the charge limit. The annual compliance statement and reporting accountant's opinion will be available to Opra. Opra will be developing its approach to the regulation of stakeholder schemes in the light of experience, taking into account the overall number of registered stakeholder schemes.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many stakeholder schemes have been registered to date; and on what date each registration took place. [134550]

Mr. Rooker: As at 26 October, five stakeholder pension schemes have been registered. Four schemes were placed on the register on 18 October and a further scheme was registered on 20 October.

The registered schemes, in alphabetical order, are—The Barclays Stakeholder Pension Scheme, Britannic Stakeholder Pension Scheme, Natwest Life Stakeholder Pension Plan, Norwich Union Stakeholder Pension Scheme, and Royal and Sun Alliance Life and Pensions Limited Stakeholder Pension Scheme.

Details of the stakeholder pension schemes register are available on the Opra website at www.stakeholder.opra.gov.uk.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the stakeholder helpline will begin operation; and what targets the Government will use to determine the success of the helpline. [134547]

Mr. Rooker: The stakeholder pensions telephone helpline will begin operation on 2 November. The service will provide impartial information for people who want to know more about stakeholder pensions. Service standards for answering calls have been agreed with the Pensions Advisory Service who will operate the helpline. Evaluation of the quality of the service is expected to include mystery shopping and customer call backs.

Petrol (Pensioners)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the effect of increases in petrol prices on the living standards of pensioners. [134417]

Mr. Rooker: In 1998–99, 'pensioner households' spent an average of £5.70 a week on petrol, diesel and other motor oils. This represented around 3 per cent. of their disposable income on average. In comparison households where the head was aged under 65 spent an average of £15.50 a week (4 per cent. of disposable income). Therefore the effect of increases in petrol prices would be smaller for pensioners than non-pensioners.

Given that expenditure on petrol, diesel and motor oils represents a small proportion of disposable income for pensioner households, the effect of price increases on living standards would be even smaller.

Notes:

1. Pensioner households are defined as those where the head is aged 65 years or over.

2. No account is taken of changes in behaviour such as people responding to higher prices by buying smaller amounts.

3. All money amounts are in 1998–99 prices. Expenditure figures are rounded to the nearest £0.10p; increases in expenditure are rounded to the nearest £0.01p.

Source:

Family Expenditure Survey 1998–99.

Benefits (Publications)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the *(a)* application forms for benefits, *(b)* information leaflets about benefits and *(c)* other publications that are issued for the public by the Benefits Agency. [134554]

Angela Eagle: The information has been placed in the Library.

Lone Parents

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents who have found work through the New Deal for Lone Parents have a youngest child aged *(a)* 14 years and above, *(b)* 15 years and above and *(c)* 16 years and above. [134658]

Angela Eagle: By the end of July 2000, 63,801 lone parents had found work through the New Deal for Lone Parents. Analysis of this data by the age of the youngest child is not available.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment the Government have made of the proportion of lone parents who have found work under the New Deal for Lone Parents who return to income support within *(a)* one month, *(b)* six months and *(c)* one year. [134656]

Angela Eagle: By the end of July 2000, 63,801 lone parents had found work through the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). The number of lone parents returning to Income Support will form part of the evaluation of NDLP which is currently underway and which will report in 2002.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents work for fewer than 16 hours a week; and how many he estimates will do so after the introduction of the £20 disregard on earnings. [134657]

Angela Eagle: In May 2000, there was 61,000 lone parents on Income Support and 1,600 on income-based Jobseeker's Allowance working fewer than 16 hours a week[1].

The introduction of the £20 disregard on earnings is likely to encourage more lone parents to take-up part-time work. However, it is not possible to quantify such effects.

[1] Source: Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 2000

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents are on Income Support, broken down into those with a youngest child *(a)* below secondary school age and *(b)* of secondary school age. [134587]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table:

The number of lone parents in Great Britain receiving Income Support shown by age of youngest child

Thousand

	Number of claimants
Below secondary school age (under 11)	751.1
Secondary school age (over 11)	159.0
All cases	910.10

Notes:
1. Lone Parents are defined as single claimants with dependants who are not receiving the disability or pensioner premium.
2. Below secondary school age is defined as under 11 years, and secondary school age is defined as over 11 years and over.
3. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
4. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.

Source:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 2000

Benefits Expenditure

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will state the proportion of total benefit expenditure composed of *(a)* contributory benefits, *(b)* means-tested benefits and *(c)* other benefits, in each of the last five years. [134752]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table:

Contributory, means-tested and other benefits as a proportion of total benefits

Percentage

	Benefit		
	Contributory	*Means-tested*	*Others*
1995–96	46	36	18
1996–97	46	35	19
1997–98	46	34	20
1998–99	47	33	20
1999–2000	47	31	22

Notes:
1. The principal contributory benefits are Retirement Pension, Widow's benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance, Statutory Sick Pay, Incapacity benefit, Maternity Allowance, Statutory Maternity Pay.
2. The principal means-tested benefits are Income Support, Income-Based Jobseeker's Allowance, Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.
3. The Housing and Council Tax Benefits include all local authority spending in addition to the money funded directly from central Government.

Source:
Departmental report 2000, Spending Review 2000.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he proposes to conclude his consideration as to whether the maximum payment in respect of gross inconvenience in CSA cases should be increased from its present figure; and if he will make a statement. [134353]

Angela Eagle: The Child Support Agency, in accordance with the Department's policy on compensation, makes consolatory payments for gross inconvenience. Each case is assessed on its individual merits. The Agency may make consolatory awards for gross inconvenience up to £250. Higher awards may be made, where appropriate, with the authority of the Department. The level of awards is under regular review.

Fraud

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on how the new anti-fraud incentive framework for local authorities, due to be introduced in April 2001, will work; and if he will place in the Library copies of the material on the framework that have been sent to local authorities. [134577]

Angela Eagle: A consultation document setting out the details of the proposed new anti-fraud incentive scheme was issued to Local Authority Associations (LAAs) on 4 August 2000. Local authorities had until 15 September 2000 to respond. We are currently considering the responses from the LAAs and will inform them of the outcome shortly.

I have arranged for a copy of the consultation document to be placed in the Library.

Pensions and Earnings Link

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will ask the Government Actuary to report on *(a)* the cost of restoring the link between the basic pension and average earnings, for each year up to and including 2005–06, taking into account the actual increase proposed for April 2001, *(b)* the effect on the balance of the National Insurance Fund at the end of each of those years and *(c)* what increases in national insurance contributions would be required. [134436]

Mr. Rooker: The report will be prepared in the terms of section 36 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes the Government intend to make to policy with regard to the *(a)* payment and *(b)* review of Disability Living Allowance arising from the periodic inquiries set up in June 1999; and if he will make a statement. [134570]

Mr. Bayley: Periodic inquiry was introduced in June 1999 as part of our response to Reports of the Social Security Select Committee into Disability Living Allowance, which recommended the introduction of a

fairer, more sensitive method of reviewing entitlement.

The inquiry process does not affect the way the benefit is paid; neither has it led to any policy changes to remove entitlement from any group of people with a specific impairment.

People having their awards considered by periodic inquiry are always informed in advance, and procedures have been developed in regular discussion with groups of those representing disabled people.

To the end of September, 23,888 people have had their benefit entitlement checked through periodic inquiry. Of these, 17,853 awards have remained unchanged, 4,426 have had awards increased and 1,609 have had their awards removed or reduced.

As agreed with the Social Security Select Committee, we published an evaluation report of the first six months of the periodic inquiry in August 2000 and a copy is available in the Library. An annual evaluation report is currently being prepared and we intend publishing it before the end of the year.

Poverty

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the percentage of the United Kingdom population living in poverty; what measures he used in making this calculation; and what measures the Government *(a)* are implementing and *(b)* plan to introduce to reduce the numbers living in poverty. [135815]

Mr. Bayley: Poverty and social exclusion are multi-faceted problems. Therefore we do not use a single definition of poverty but instead use a range of indicators to monitor the progress of our strategy. Information relating to the indicators can be found in the second Government "Opportunity for all" report on tackling poverty and social exclusion "One year on: making a difference" (Cm 4865). The report also describes and monitors the impact of policies we have already introduced, and sets out our plans for the future.

Multiple Deprivation Index

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if his Department uses the index of multiple deprivation in the allocation of funds. [134562]

Angela Eagle: Social Security benefit expenditure is demand led apart from the cash limited budget of the discretionary Social Fund, which is allocated to Benefits Agency District Offices. However, the index of multiple deprivation is not used for this purpose.

TREASURY

Income Tax

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1011W, on income tax, if he will estimate the level of personal income tax allowance if the 10 pence band was abolished at a cost of *(a)* £2.6 billion, *(b)* £3 billion and *(c)* £3.5 billion in a full year; and if he will make a statement. [134237]

Dawn Primarolo: If the 10p band was abolished in 2000–01 and income tax personal allowances were increased, by the following amounts, then the revenue effects in a full-year are shown in the table:

Abolish the 10p rate and increase income tax personal allowances by:	*Revenue effect (£ billion)*
£1,520	–4.6
£1,340	–4.5
£1,260	–3.0
£1,190	–2.6

These estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and are consistent with the March 2000 Budget.

The revenue effects provided have not taken account of any consequential effects on the level of National Insurance contributions. All the figures shown are the estimated direct effects of tax changes on tax revenues. In practice, tax changes will themselves effect economic variables, which in turn will have further effects on tax revenues.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 4 September on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Weston. [135787]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I replied to the right hon. Member on 26 October.

Oil Revenues

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate (1) of the revenues from oil production in the UK assuming the current oil price continues unchanged until the end of the financial year; [135085]

(2) of the total extra revenue coming to the Government additional to the Budget forecast as a result of higher oil prices, assuming present prices continue unchanged until the end of the financial year. [135087]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Updated revenue forecasts will be published in the Pre-Budget Report on 8 November.

Fuel Prices

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had since July with pensioners' representatives about the impact of fuel prices on the living standards of elderly people. [134653]

Mr. Timms: All Treasury Ministers meet with a variety of organisations and interest groups to discuss a wide range of issues. The Government are giving particular help to pensioners this winter by increasing the winter fuel payment from £100 to £150.

Gaming Tax

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the revenue from the taxation of gaming in each of the last three years. [134826]

Mr. Timms: Information on the revenue from the taxation of gaming can be found in the HM Customs and Excise statistical bulletin "Receipts for Betting, Gaming and Lottery Duties", a copy of which is in the Library.

Red Diesel

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to reduce the duty on red diesel. [134654]

Mr. Timms: I cannot anticipate my right hon. Friend's Budget Statement.

Credit Unions

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to create a central services organisation for credit unions, following the November 1999 report of the Treasury Credit Unions Taskforce. [135821]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government strongly support the establishment of a central services organisation, as recommended by the taskforce.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many credit unions are currently operating in *(a)* Coventry and *(b)* the United Kingdom; and what links the Treasury has with them and their representative body. [135819]

Miss Melanie Johnson: There are seven credit unions in Coventry, and 688 in Great Britain. I am pleased to be attending the launch event for Coventry Millennium and Phoenix Five credit unions on 14 November. The Treasury has regular contacts with the representative bodies.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to *(a)* extend the ability of credit unions to borrow and *(b)* amend the legislation controlling them; and what assessment he has made of how such plans will affect credit unions in Coventry. [135820]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government will extend credit unions' ability to borrow and enhance their supervision following the implementation of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. This will improve the growth potential of all credit unions, by giving their members greater confidence about the safety of their savings and allowing them to play a bigger role in tackling the problems of financial exclusion.

Income Statistics

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average income and wealth are of *(a)* an urban dweller and *(b)* a rural dweller. [134497]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated 30 October 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on average income and wealth in urban and rural dwellers.

Information on income is available from the 1998–99 Family Expenditure Survey which categorises local authority districts by population density. Estimated average income was £458 a week in metropolitan districts and high and medium density non-metropolitan districts, and £454 a week in low density districts. Low density is defined as under 2.2 persons per hectare. About a quarter of households in the UK are in such districts, which include some small towns and their surrounding areas.

Like all estimates from sample surveys, these are subject to sampling variability. The difference between them is well within the range to be expected from chance variation.

Information is not available on wealth.

Euro

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent assessment his Department has made of *(a)* public support for and *(b)* public opposition to replacing the pound with the single European currency. [135023]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The determining factor underpinning any Government decision to join the single currency is whether the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous. Because of the magnitude of the decision, the Government believe that whenever a decision to enter is taken by Government, it should be put to a referendum of the British people.

Pension Schemes

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the average extra annual payment which a subscriber to a pension scheme must pay to achieve the same return as would have occurred if the tax credit on dividends had not been abolished. [134967]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Our package of corporation tax reforms included not only the withdrawal of payable tax credits on dividends but also cuts in corporation tax rates. These and other measures will help to improve investment performance. The overall effect of these changes on pension schemes will vary depending upon factors such as the type of scheme and the investment policy adopted. So it is not possible to provide a general estimate of the effect on pension schemes' ability to meet specific investment targets.

Employment Statistics

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if data on the number of people in employment are available by Employment Service area. [134736]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Frank Field, dated 30 October 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the availability of employment statistics by Employment Service area.

The Annual Employment Survey, which is the current source of data on numbers of employee jobs, is no longer analysed by Employment Service Area. The geography was discontinued several years ago. The latest information for the available geographies (e.g. Local Authority districts) is for September 1998 and may be accessed from the NOMIS database in the House of Commons Library.

Unemployment Statistics

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people were unemployed in the Taunton constituency in each year since 1979 according to the International Labour Organisation definition. [134319]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Jackie Ballard, dated 30 October 2000:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the number of people unemployed in the Taunton constituency in each year since 1979 according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) definition.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the main source of labour market data on individuals used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). However, estimates for the number of people ILO unemployed are not available for small areas such as the constituency of Taunton.

The measure of unemployment derived from the LFS is defined on a consistent and Internationally recognised basis set out by the ILO. It counts as unemployed people who are a) without a paid job, b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained. This measure has been used in the LFS from 1984 onwards.

ONS also publishes the monthly numbers of people who are claiming unemployment-related benefits, also known as the Claimant Count. Comparable figures (based on the 1995 boundaries) are available since 1996. The attached table gives the annual average levels of claimants in the Taunton parliamentary constituency since 1996.

Information on the unadjusted claimant level by parliamentary constituency ward based on the 1981 wards are available monthly from June 1983 to January 1996 and can be obtained from the Nomis database in the House of Commons Library.

The annual average levels of claimants in the Taunton parliamentary constituency

Year	*Number*	*Rate*
1996	2,975	5.2
1997	2,195	3.9
1998	1,722	3.0
1999	1,503	2.5

Average for the nine months Jan to Sep 2000 is 1,184 (2.0 per cent.).

European Movement

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much is allocated to the European Movement in the Draft EU Budget for 2000. [134126]

Miss Melanie Johnson: My hon. Friend will find this information in the Draft EC Budget and Adopted EC Budget for 2000, copies of which have been deposited in the Library.

European Central Bank

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent European Central Bank intervention in the currency markets. [135379]

Miss Melanie Johnson: After the September 23 meeting in Prague of the G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors the following statement was released:

> At the initiative of the European Central Bank, the monetary authorities of the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom and Canada joined with the European Central Bank on Friday, September 22, in concerted intervention in exchange markets, because of the shared concern of Finance Ministers and Governors about the potential implications of recent movements in the euro for the world economy. In light of recent developments, we will continue to monitor developments closely and to co-operate in exchange markets as appropriate.

DEFENCE

Defence Logistics Organisation

1. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress in establishing the Defence Logistics Organisation. [132984]

34. **Mr. Paul Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress in establishing the Defence Logistics Organisation. [133018]

Mr. Spellar: Since my last reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) on 17 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 365W the Defence Logistics Organisation has made further progress to improve logistics support to our armed forces. Over the past six months, the DLO has successfully provided uninterrupted support to operations in Kosovo, East Timor, Mozambique and Sierra Leone while creating the new joint organisation. The DLO has also launched a number of major business initiatives designed to release resources for reinvestment in front line capability, and to achieve the strategic goal to reduce the DLO's output costs by 20 per cent. by 2005.

Army Regiments

5. **Laura Moffatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many regular army regiments were *(a)* abolished and *(b)* amalgamated as a result of (i) "Options for Change" and (ii) the Strategic Defence Review. [132988]

Mr. Hoon: As the result of "Options for Change" a total of 12 regular army regiments were disbanded and 26 were amalgamated. No regular army regiments were disbanded or amalgamated as a result of the Strategic Defence Review; indeed two engineer regiments, disbanded following "Options for Change", were reformed.

Army Operations

16. **Mr. Ennis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, what percentage of the Army is committed to, preparing for, or recovering from operations. [133000]

Mr. Spellar: Some 22 per cent. of the trained Army is committed to Operations. This figure includes units preparing for, deployed on and recovering from operations. Of these, 15 per cent. of the trained Army is currently deployed on operations.

There has been a significant reduction in commitment levels over the past year, particularly since the height of the Kosovo campaign in July 1999 when the commitment

level reached a peak of 44 per cent. The current level of commitment is below that inherited from the previous Administration.

Average unit tour intervals in the Army have also decreased over recent years and while in some specialist areas tour intervals remain at around 12 months, our latest assessment of the average time between unit tours across the Army for this year is around 30 months, the best figure for at least five years.

Apache Attack Helicopter

19. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Apache attack helicopter will enter into service. [133003]

Mr. Spellar: The Apache attack helicopter is on schedule to enter service in December this year, when the ninth aircraft is delivered. This date has not altered from when the Apache prime contract was placed in 1996 and its achievement will be a significant milestone on the road to the Army achieving the operational availability of the first squadron of Apaches in late 2002.

C-17 Transport Aircraft

23. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the in-service date is for the first of the RAF's new C-17 transport aircraft. [133007]

Mr. Hoon: On 2 September, we signed a contract for the lease of four C-17 aircraft for a period of seven years. On current plans, the aircraft should be available and working-up from next summer onwards to be ready to support the Joint Rapid Reaction Force by the end of the year. The In Service Date is December 2001.

Married Quarters

24. **Mr. Peter Bradley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans the Government have to improve the condition of married quarters for service personnel. [133008]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence is giving priority to ensuring that Service families are accommodated in good quality, modern houses, not only for the present well being of the families but also as encouragement to retention and recruiting. Through the Defence Housing Executive, the Department has a full programme of refurbishment and rebuilding in place to improve the condition of its core housing stock over the next five years.

Aircraft Carriers

25. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the total value is of the contracts awarded to date for the design of the future generation of aircraft carriers. [133009]

Mr. Hoon: Two contracts, each potentially worth up to £30 million, for work to investigate options for the design of the future aircraft carrier have been awarded to BAE Systems and Thomson-CSF Naval Systems.

In addition a number of parallel contracts, worth up to a further £3 million, have been placed with DERA and the US Authorities for a variety of support tasks.

Fitness Levels

27. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will meet Ministers at the Department for Education and Employment to discuss the possibility of creating a new deal option to help young unemployed people attain fitness levels required for employment in the armed forces. [133011]

Mr. Spellar: The armed forces already contribute to the New Deal scheme and to the personal development of young people. The Services work closely with New Deal personal advisers and the further education colleges, to identify what self-development is required to make young people more confident and self-reliant. The armed forces provide "Taster Days" for those young unemployed people wanting to learn more about service life.

Each Service also runs personal development courses for young people:

For the naval service, a typical course includes; fire fighting, boatwork, an assault course, physical recreation, as well as careers presentations and an opportunity to sit the Recruit Test. For 2000–01, the aim is to run 50 of these five-day courses for 750 students.

The Army runs a "Pathfinder" programme, which includes personal development courses, work experience arrangements and "Look at Life" visits. The "Look at Life" visits enable young people to spend up to two weeks at an Army unit to experience at first hand the realities of Army life, and they include an element of physical fitness training. In the past year, over 100,000 young people have taken part in this programme.

The RAF, in association with Newham College of Further Education, has recently set up personal development courses as part of its ethnic minority recruiting effort. Students visit Service establishments, and undertake some adventure training.

In addition, the armed forces launched the "Skill Force" youth initiative on 5 September, as a contribution to the Government's efforts to deal with social exclusion. The services have deployed two teams of trained instructors into a total of six schools in the Newcastle and Norfolk areas, where the initiative is being piloted. The instructors are delivering key skills training to children who have been disapplied from part of the national curriculum and who are in danger of disaffection. There is an element of physical training involved with Skill Force. Although this is not a recruiting initiative, Skill Force will make the 15–16 year old participants fitter than they otherwise would be, and improve their chances of passing basic training if they do decide to join the armed forces.

Discussions are now being held between departments to determine other ways in which the armed forces can help to deliver the Government's policies on social exclusion.

Ethnic Minorities

29. **Mr. Woolas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made by each of the three armed services in meeting their targets for recruitment among Britain's ethnic minorities. [133013]

Mr. Spellar: The ethnic minority recruiting goal for 2000–01 is 4 per cent. For the period from 1 April to 1 September this year, 2.2 per cent. of the armed forces intake from the British labour market came from the British ethnic minority communities. Although short of the 4 per cent. goal, the figure represents an improvement on achievement levels for the corresponding period for

the last financial year, which stood at about 1.8 per cent. If this improvement continues for the rest of the financial year, it would indicate that ethnic minority recruitment into the armed forces is moving in the right direction.

Ethnic minority recruiting levels broken down for each Service for the period are:

Naval Service—0.8 per cent.

Army—2.8 per cent.

RAF—1.9 per cent.

Single Living Accommodation

30. **Mr. Crausby:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans the Government have to improve armed forces single living accommodation. [133014]

38. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans the Government have to improve armed forces single living accommodation. [133022]

Mr. Spellar: Improving the retention of armed forces personnel is a high priority for the Department. Poor single living accommodation has been identified as a cause of dissatisfaction among Service personnel; improving accommodation could, therefore, have a positive impact in helping to address retention problems.

Action is being taken, however, to improve single living accommodation. By 2005 over 12,000 bedspaces will have either been built or refurbished.

Eurocorps

31. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the United Kingdom to participate in the Eurocorps. [133015]

Mr. Hoon: There are no plans for UK forces to form a permanent part of the Eurocorps. The UK provides a liaison officer to Headquarters Eurocorps. Additionally, during its successful deployment to Kosovo, where it formed the kernel of the Headquarters commanding the force of around 45,000 troops deployed in KFOR III, the UK provided 62 augmentees to HQ Eurocorps, as did other KFOR nations who are not contributing members of the Eurocorps.

Territorial Army

32. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the strength of the Territorial Army. [133016]

Mr. Spellar: The latest available official figures give the strength of the Territorial Army as 40,667.

Efficiency Savings

33. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of the 100 financially most significant efficiency savings measures for the financial year 1999–2000, with a brief explanation of each measure. [133017]

Mr. Hoon: Information held centrally on the financially significant efficiency measures for financial year 1999–2000 has been provided to the House of Commons Defence Committee and is therefore covered by Parliamentary privilege. I have written to the hon. Member separately to provide what information I can, and a copy of my letter has been placed in the Library of the House.

UN Deployments

35. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proposals he has made to the UN about improving its defence capability in cases where UN deployments *(a)* involve and *(b)* do not involve British troops. [133019]

Mr. Hoon: The UK worked closely with the UN Secretary-General's expert panel during the preparation of the recently published Brahimi Report on reforming UN Peace Operations. Key proposals in the Report aimed at strengthening the UN's defence capability include enhancing early warning mechanisms and information analysis; creating integrated teams for the planning and execution of peacekeeping missions; and improving deployment times and the training and equipping of troops. The Report recommends many of the reforms for which we have argued for some years. They will be of vital importance for all UN deployments including those involving British troops. We are pressing the UN for their speedy implementation.

Precision-guided Bombing Capability

36. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has to improve the RAF's precision-guided bombing capability. [133020]

Mr. Spellar: The intention to procure an interim precision guided bombing capability for the Royal Air Force as quickly as possible was announced on 24 July. Since then, we have selected Raytheon Systems Corporation to supply the RAF with Enhanced Paveway bombs, subject to the successful completion of contractual negotiations. These bombs will make use of Global Positioning System technology to strike targets accurately in all weather conditions and are expected to be in service with RAF Tornado GR4 aircraft by October next year. This capability will be supplemented by an additional all weather precision guided bombing system that we are currently planning to introduce in 2006.

Tropical Diseases

39. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to ensure that rapid reaction forces are adequately protected against the common tropical diseases before they leave the UK. [133023]

Mr. Spellar: It is the Ministry of Defence's policy that all service personnel should be up to date with routine vaccinations and that members of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces should be up to date with certain additional vaccinations, depending on their degree of readiness. Personnel deploying to high risk areas should receive further vaccinations specific to the risks they face. Other aspects of medical preparedness will depend on the role of the deploying forces and the geographical location to which they are deploying. The role of commanding officers in maintaining medical and other aspects of preparedness of their personnel for military operations has recently been emphasised through the chain of command.

Personnel

40. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many armed services personnel there were on 1 May 1997; what the current numbers are; and if he will make a statement. [132989]

Mr. Spellar: As at 1 May 1997 the trained strength of the armed forces was 196,857 although there were plans in hand at that time to reduce the trained requirement.

Since then the trained requirement of the Naval service and the RAF has been reduced by about 7,800, reflected in the reduction in trained strength. The Army requirement increased by some 3,000 as a result of SDR.

On 1 September 2000, the trained strength of the armed forces was 189,470.

We aim to reach broad manning balance in the Naval service in Financial Year 2002–03 and in the Army in Financial Year 2004–05. The RAF is in broad manning balance but this masks surpluses and, more importantly, deficits in a number of branches and trades, e.g. shortfall of fast jet pilots, navigators, engineering and medical officers.

Procurement

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to improve the effectiveness of the equipment supplied to the armed forces. [133021]

Mr. Hoon: It is vital that our Armed Forces are properly equipped and we are determined to ensure that the right equipment is available at the right time. We have in hand a large equipment programme to radically improve the equipment of the Armed Forces. For example, the new Type 45 destroyer will carry the world-class Principal Anti-Air Missile System; Challenger 2, which is currently being brought into service, will be the best-protected main battle tank on the modern battlefield; and the Meteor missile will allow Eurofighter to engage multiple and manoeuvring targets simultaneously, at greater range than before, in all weathers, day or night, and with a greater level of survivability.

Since taking office we have radically improved the Ministry of Defence's procurement processes. We have transformed the former Defence Procurement Executive into the Defence Procurement Agency (DPA), and created the Defence Logistics Organisation (DLO). The DLO has provided the opportunity to take a new, joint approach to the delivery of logistics support to the Armed Forces. Within the DPA and the DLO we have completed the roll out of 138 Integrated Project Teams (IPTs), to manage specific equipment projects through their procurement and in-service lives, continually searching for ways to improve its operational effectiveness and its efficiency. And within the Ministry of Defence Central Staff we have established an accountable customer who provides, for the first time, a single focus responsible for taking forward planning decisions based on capability need.

We have introduced a whole life approach to equipment acquisition focused on long-term operational effectiveness and cost, and streamlined our management structures and processes. Incremental acquisition is used where appropriate to keep up with rapidly emerging technologies and reduce risk. We are also investing more, and earlier, to reduce procurement risk. With industry's close involvement, this should result in better project definition (and cost estimating).

Measures to sustain and maintain the Smart Procurement initiative are being taken forward under the title 'Smart Acquisition', recognising the through-life nature of the business.

Posthumous Awards

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will introduce a provision for the automatic award of a posthumous medal for British soldiers killed in action; and if he will make a statement. [133010]

Mr. Hoon: It has been a long-standing practice in this country that those killed while on campaign or operational service automatically qualify for the relevant campaign medal, which is presented to their next of kin. In this way, the deaths of many of those members of our armed forces who are killed in action are already recognised by the award of a medal.

The institution of new medals is approved by Her Majesty The Queen, based on the advice submitted to Her by the interdepartmental Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals. There are currently no plans to institute a new medal for personnel killed in action. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence is however considering the whole question of recognition of those who die while serving in the armed forces.

Site Disposals

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what consultations he has had about site disposals in the Surrey Heath constituency, with special reference to *(a)* the continuing development of the Alma-Dettingen barracks site in the Surrey Heath constituency, *(b)* the future of the Princess Royal Barracks, Deepcut and *(c)* the future of the Staff College site, Camberley. [132987]

Dr. Moonie: Since the sale of Alma Dettingen Barracks to Barratt Homes there have been no further consultations. There have also been no consultations over the future of Princess Royal Barracks, Deepcut or that of the Staff College Camberley.

Funding (Cadets)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will increase the level of funding for the Army, Air and Sea Cadets. [132999]

Mr. Spellar: This year the total budget for the Cadet Organisations is £58.3 million. This direct funding demonstrates our commitment to the cadet organisations. The cadet organisations also benefit from MOD money through non-case support in the form of the use of MOD vehicles and certain facilities within the MOD estate, flight experience in operational aircraft, and the use of sailing craft and small powered craft by the Sea Cadets.

Falkland Islands

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the *(a)* annual cost and *(b)* current role of British forces in the Falkland Islands. [134960]

Mr. Spellar: The role of the British Forces in the Falkland Islands is to demonstrate the United Kingdom's continued commitment to the islands and uphold the right of the islanders to self determination.

In respect of the annual cost of the Falkland Islands Garrison I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 18 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 104W to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker).

Accommodation (Service Personnel)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the standard of accommodation for British service men and service women deployed in *(a)* Kuwait, *(b)* Kosovo and *(c)* the Falkland Islands. [134962]

Mr. Spellar: RAF personnel in Kuwait are accommodated on the Kuwaiti Air Force base at Ali Al Salem. The UK receives extensive Host Nation Support from the Kuwaiti Government which is carrying out a major series of improvements to both the living and working accommodation at the base.

Living and working accommodation for the vast majority of our personnel in Kosovo is provided at 13 Temporary Field Accommodation Camps. These provide temperature controlled, hard-walled living accommodation, with adjacent toilets and ablution facilities, kitchen and dining facilities; laundries; headquarters; office facilities and specialist workshops and stores. In addition, welfare and recreation facilities have been provided. Temporary Field Accommodation has been welcomed by our troops and we believe it to be the best field accommodation in the Balkans.

The latest survey of grading for condition of living accommodation in the Falkland Islands shows that all families quarters and the majority of the single living accommodation units are in good condition, with over 15 years of residual life, although improvements to fire prevention and heating systems are necessary in the short-term.

Kuwait

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what military assistance Britain is giving to Kuwait. [134961]

Mr. Spellar: The UK provides extensive military assistance to Kuwait. Our bilateral co-operation programme covers a wide range of activities across the defence spectrum. The 47 strong British Military Mission (BMM) which is permanently based in Kuwait provides advice and support to the reform of the Kuwaiti armed forces. We are helping to develop the Kuwaiti Flying Training School and continue to lend our support to the Kuwait Staff College. Members of Kuwait's Navy, Army and Air Force are represented on training, including flying training, and staff courses in the UK. We are working hard also to examine proposals to help the Kuwaitis develop their own defence doctrine and continue to explore potential avenues for practical military exercises.

The British defence industry continues to bid competitively to support the modernisation of the Kuwaiti armed forces. The Kuwait Programme Office is a dedicated integrated team, which is fully funded by the Kuwaitis and is responsible for setting up government to government arrangements covering the procurement of defence equipment from British contractors. Current projects include the Desert Warrior, Sea Skua and servicing of the Hawk as well as the Tucano Training aircraft.

The UK contributes 11 service personnel to UNIKOM which monitors the UN defined border and demilitarised zone between Iraq and Kuwait.

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on KFOR's efforts in preventing ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo. [133096]

Mr. Spellar: Currently KFOR estimates that the Serb community in Kosovo numbers between 80,000 and 100,000. Three out of four KFOR soldiers are dedicated to patrolling, manning checkpoints and mounting border controls. Each multinational brigade allocates an average of 400 personnel to tasks specifically linked to the protection of minorities and significant KFOR forces remain assigned throughout Kosovo to the protection of patrimonial sites on a 24 hours a day basis.

When KFOR arrived in Kosovo in June 1999 there was a weekly murder rate of 50. Now this figure is down to an average of five per week. The KFOR assessment is that the majority of crime is no longer ethnically motivated.

In the UK controlled sector of central Kosovo, KFOR troops have been doing pioneering work with UNMIK and NGOs to improve conditions of life and work there for the Serb community. Our troops have undertaken initiatives to provide permanent and mobile vehicle check-points in sensitive areas, watch towers to allow farmers to work in fields, random patrolling, raids on the houses of hard-liners and much more. With such initiatives under way, we hope to establish a measure of security both for the Serbs still present in Kosovo and for those who will feel confident enough to return. In addition, we are working to encourage Serb returns to villages in the central area of Kosovo.

Avro Vulcan B.2 XH558

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if his Department is giving assistance to the Return to Flight campaign for Avro Vulcan B.2 XH558. [134337]

Dr. Moonie: It is Ministry of Defence policy that public funds should not be used to subsidise private ventures of this kind, however worthy.

Army Overstretch

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Army overstretch over the past three years. [134415]

Mr. Spellar: Two key measures of overstretch in the Army are the percentage of the Army committed and deployed on operations and the time interval between deployments.

Commitment levels, which include preparation for and recovery from deployments, have fluctuated over the past three years, peaking in June 1999 during the height of the

Kosovo campaign at 44 per cent. Since then they have declined steadily to the current level of 22 per cent. 15 per cent. of the Army is deployed.

Average unit tour intervals in the Army have also improved over recent years. While in some specialist areas these remain at around 12 months, our latest assessment of the average time between unit tours across the Army for this year is around 30 months, the best figure for at least five years.

Armed Forces (Disabled Recruitment)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his policy is on the recruitment of disabled people for front-line duty with the armed forces. [134919]

Mr. Spellar: The armed forces are required to maintain the highest possible level of combat effectiveness and to be able to undertake military operations anywhere in the world at very short notice. It is not therefore possible to recruit those with a disability into the armed forces which are exempt from the employment provisions (Part 2) of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Hunter-killer Submarines

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of when each of the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines will return to sea. [134929]

Mr. Spellar: Until the inspection programme currently under way to assess each of our nuclear powered hunter-killer submarines is completed, it is not possible to finalise the repair programme or to quantify the operational implications.

British Military Communications (Kosovo)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the monitoring of British military communications during the Kosovo campaign by *(a)* Serb forces and *(b)* the Kosovo Liberation Army. [134916]

Mr. Spellar: Yugoslav armed forces do have an electronic recognition capability, designed primarily for tactical use. This capability has been publicly acknowledged by the Yugoslav armed forces. We assumed that they made use of this capability during the Kosovo campaign. We have no evidence to suggest that the KLA had any such developed capability.

Sorties (Iraqi Targets)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many sorties have been flown involving the discharge of weaponry against Iraqi targets since the end of the Gulf War. [134926]

Mr. Spellar: Between 1 August 1992 and 19 October 2000, UK aircraft released ordnance over Iraq on 50 days.

Low Flying Aircraft

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will review procedures for the regulation of low-flying aircraft following the report of the UK Airprox Board into incidents over Northumberland in October 1999. [135126]

Dr. Moonie: As the third UK Airprox Board report makes clear, the military low flying adviser to the Board briefed members on a number of trial measures, agreed between military and civil bodies, following three Airprox involving military aircraft over Northumberland in October 1999. These measures aim to enhance flight safety in this area, minimise the risk of recurrence, and will be reviewed towards the end of the year.

Army Base, Pirbright

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Army base at Pirbright. [134419]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The Army base at Pirbright comprises an Army Training Regiment (ATR), a Recruit Selection Centre (RSC) and a Regular Army Battalion. Although we are currently undertaking several Army-wide reviews, there are currently no plans to dispose of the site.

PRIME MINISTER

Annual Report

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Prime Minister (1) pursuant to his answer of 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 809W, on the Common Agricultural Policy, when he was first informed of the drafting errors on page 15 of the Government's Annual Report; what steps he is taking to publish a correction; and when the errors were corrected on the Government's website; [134067]

(2) if he will list the errors in the Government's Annual Report 1999–2000; when he was informed of each one; and what steps he is taking to make the correct information public; [134031]

(3) pursuant to his answer of 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 809W, on the Common Agricultural Policy, if he will make a statement on how the drafting error on page 15 of the Government's Annual Report occurred. [134068]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* Several factual errors occurred in this year's Annual Report 1999–2000, all of which were the result of oversights in the drafting and editorial process. The errors are as follows:

p3, column 1, para 6:

There are nearly 5,000 more doctors and 1,000 more nurses.

should read:

There are nearly 5,000 more doctors and 10,000 more nurses.

p7, column 1, para 1:

Interest rates were at 6.25 per cent. and mortgage rates at 6.9 per cent.

should read:

Interest rates were at 6 per cent. and mortgage rates at 6.9 per cent.

p15, column 2, para 2:

Thanks to the latest EU 'Agenda 2000' budget reforms negotiated this year, the monthly bill for a family of four will fall on average by £50.

should read:

Thanks to the latest EU 'Agenda 2000' budget reforms negotiated this year, the annual bill for a family of four will fall on average by £65.

p37, caption with map:

The Forensic Science Service has six operational laboratories in England

should read:

The Forensic Science Service has six operational laboratories in England and Wales

p47, column 1, para 4:

As part of the delivery of this vision, this year saw the opening of the UK Sports Institute, providing world-class facilities, coaching and support in Sheffield and national and regional centres around the UK.

should read:

As part of the delivery of this vision, this year saw the opening of the UK Sports Institute, which will provide world-class facilities, coaching and support in Sheffield and national and regional centres around the UK.

All these errors have been corrected in the internet version of the Report; and an erratum slip included with the printed version wherever possible, including in the bound version held by the House.

Medical Treatment (Withholding and Withdrawal)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Prime Minister from whom he has received representations on the legality of the British Medical Association's guidelines for the withholding and withdrawal of treatment. [134465]

The Prime Minister: As far as I am aware I have not received any representations on this issue.

Euro

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister what factors other than economic ones he would take into account in deciding whether to support the replacement of the pound by the single European currency. [135003]

The Prime Minister: The determining factor underpinning any Government decision on joining the single currency is whether the economic case for UK joining is clear and unambiguous.

Engagements

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will list his official engagements on 17 September; [135018]

(2) for what reason he did not attend the Battle of Britain Memorial Service at Westminster Abbey on 17 September. [135019]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence represented the Government at the Battle of Britain Memorial Service in Westminster Abbey. I paid my respects at a private church service with my family. I had no public engagements.

Summer Adjournment (Recall)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Prime Minister how many letters he received from hon. Members during the summer adjournment calling for a recall of Parliament because of the fuel crisis. [134571]

The Prime Minister: In accordance with convention, correspondence received by Departments from hon. Members is treated in confidence.

EU Employment Directive

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Prime Minister how many letters he has received alleging that there was a threat to religious freedom posed by the EU directive on employment agreed between the Governments of the EU on 17 October. [135065]

The Prime Minister: The information is not held in the form requested.

Iraq Hijack

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will hold discussions with the Iraqi Government concerning the recent hijack of an aircraft in Iraq. [135706]

The Prime Minister: The Government welcome the peaceful resolution of the recent hijacking of a Saudi Arabian aircraft and the safe return of all British citizens to the UK. We have no plans to hold discussions with the Iraqi Government on this subject.

WALES

GDP

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his calculation is of the percentage contribution made in the current financial year by each industry and service to the gross domestic product of Wales after deduction of the subsidies paid from UK Government and European sources. [134498]

Mr. Paul Murphy: No estimates have been made for the current year. In 1997, the most recent year for which figures are available, the contribution to GDP of each major sector was as set out in the table:

Sector	*Percentage of GDP*
Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing	1.8
Mining and quarrying, including oil and gas extraction	0.2
Other mining and quarrying	0.3
Manufacturing	27.3
Electricity, gas, and water supply	2.2
Construction	5.3
Wholesale and retail trade	10.2
Hotels and restaurants	3.4
Transport and communication	6.0
Financial intermediation	3.5
Real estate, renting and business activities	14.2
Public administration and defence	6.2
Education	6.0
Health and social work	8.6
Other services	4.7

There are no readily available estimates of direct subsidies across all sectors.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many times he visited for official engagements the counties of *(a)* Gwynedd, *(b)* Ynys Môn, *(c)* Conwy, *(d)* Denbigh, *(e)* Flint, *(f)* Wrexham, *(g)* Powys, *(h)* Ceredigion, *(i)* Carmarthenshire and *(j)* Pembroke, between 1 August and 30 September. [135805]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Between 1 August and 30 September 2000 the Secretary of State for Wales made visits to Conwy, Denbigh and Pembroke.

Over the same period the Under-Secretary visited Gwynedd, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Carmarthenshire.

National Assembly Legislation

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the legislation enacted during the present session which has made specific provisions for Wales arising from representations made by the National Assembly for Wales. [135742]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I take very seriously my duty to consult the National Assembly on the Government's legislative programme. In addition to formal participation in an Assembly plenary session each year, this involves ongoing dialogue at both ministerial and official levels. It is largely by this means, rather than through representations, that we are able to take account of the Assembly's interests in current or forthcoming Bills.

To date, the following Acts have included specific provisions for Wales which emerged from this partnership approach:

Care Standards Act 2000

Carers and Disabled Children Act 2000

Electronic Communications Act 2000

Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000

Learning and Skills Act 2000

Local Government Act 2000.

Agricultural Workers

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of the Welsh workforce was engaged in agricultural work in each of previous 10 years. [135235]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Information cannot be provided in the form requested. Percentages of civilian employee jobs in agriculture are in the table. These exclude the self employed, for whom an industry-specific breakdown is not available.

	Per cent.
1989	2.1
1990	2.0
1991	2.1
1992	2.0
1993	2.0
1994	1.8
1995	1.8
1996	1.8
1997	1.8
1998	2.1

Since 1 July 1999, this has been the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the average farmer's income by constituency in Wales for the last five years. [135234]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Figures are not available at the constituency level.

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the New Deal for Young People in Wales. [134410]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The New Deal for 18–24 year olds continues to make excellent progress in Wales. We are already well past our target of helping 13,000 young unemployed people into work by the end of this Parliament. Latest figures show that more than 15,600 young people in Wales have secured employment.

A further 6,800 people are currently being helped through the New Deal; receiving advice and guidance or pursuing education, training, or work experience.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Class Sizes

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what class sizes were for each age group in each year since 1979 in the Taunton constituency. [134317]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information on average class sizes collected in January for the parliamentary constituency of Taunton is shown in the tables. Information on average class sizes by individual ages and by parliamentary constituency is not available prior to 1996.

The Government are well on course to deliver their pledge to limit infant classes for five, six and seven-year-olds to 30 or below by September 2001. When the Government came to power, there were nearly half a million children in large infant classes. By January 2000, this had been reduced to 177,000—300,000 infants are already benefiting from the initiative. £620 million is available to support the pledge, and allocations to schools in Taunton so far amount to £579,000. This helped Somerset LEA to reduce the average size of Key Stage 1 classes in the constituency to 26.7 in January 2000. In January 1997, the figure was 27.4.

January 2000 also saw a fall in the size of the average junior class in England; and a continuing fall in the size of the average primary class, after rising for a decade. The size of the average secondary class nationally, at 22, is still five below the average primary class. Secondary headteachers are receiving up to £70,000 in direct grant to spend as they choose. If this were spent on recruiting teachers, the average secondary class size could be reduced by up to 0.8. Information at national and local

education authority area level on infant class sizes for September 2000 will be published in a Statistical First Release on the 1st November, copies of which will be placed in the House of Commons Library. The figures will also be available on the Department's statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics.

Average size of classes taught by one teacher by year group in maintained primary schools[1] in the parliamentary constituency of Taunton
1996–2000
Position as at January

	Year group									
	Reception	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*Mixed*	*Overall*[2]
2000[3]										
Average class size	25.9	27.7	28.7	29.6	28.7	30.9	30.6	[4]—	—	28.4
Pupils	855	415	517	444	431	495	490	[4]—	4,117	7,798
Classes	33	15	18	15	15	16	16	[4]—	145	275
1999[3]										
Average class size	26.2	28.1	28.6	29.1	29.5	28.8	28.1	[4]—	29.2	28.9
Pupils	1,020	451	522	571	517	471	463	[4]—	4,144	8,212
Classes	39	16	18	19	17	15	15	[4]—	142	284
1998[3]										
Average class size	25.6	28.7	29.6	30.9	31.1	30.8	33.1	[5]—	28.7	28.8
Pupils	920	516	533	433	436	370	397	[5]—	4,340	8,004
Classes	36	18	18	14	14	12	12	[5]—	151	278
1997[3]										
Average class size	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	28.4
Pupils	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	7,773
Classes	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	274
1996[3]										
Average class size	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	28.0
Pupils	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	7,481
Classes	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	[5]—	267

[1] Classes as taught at a selected time on the census day
[2] Includes all year groups and nursery classes
[3] Excludes classes taught by two or more teachers. The number of such classes can vary significantly from year to year which may impact on the overall pupil numbers recorded in one teacher classes
[4] Not applicable (no classes of this type)
[5] Not available

Average size of classes taught by one teacher by age band in maintained secondary schools[1] in the parliamentary constituency of Taunton
1996–2000
Position as at January

	Ages[2]				
	Middle classes	*Mainly under 14s*	*Mainly 14 and 15*	*16 or older*	*Overall*
2000					
Average class size	17.0	26.8	21.8	[3]—	24.5
Pupils	102	3,431	2,026	[3]—	5,559
Classes	6	128	93	[3]—	227
1999					
Average class size	29.0	26.0	21.8	[3]—	24.3
Pupils	29	3,281	1,965	[3]—	5,275
Classes	1	126	90	[3]—	217
1998					
Average class size	22.3	25.5	22.9	[3]—	24.4
Pupils	89	3,188	2,018	[3]—	5,295
Classes	4	125	88	[3]—	217
1997					
Average class size	18.1	24.2	22.7	[3]—	23.4
Pupils	127	3,071	2,041	[3]—	5,239
Classes	7	127	90	[3]—	224
1996					
Average class size	17.8	24.9	22.3	[3]—	23.5
Pupils	142	2,767	1,982	[3]—	4,891
Classes	8	111	89	[3]—	208

[1] Classes as taught at a selected time on the census day
[2] Ages as the start of the academic year (August 31)
[3] Not applicable (no classes of this type)

Combined Standards Funds

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress he has made in combining the 49 standards funds into six blocks. [134396]

Ms Estelle Morris: As part of our reforms to make the Standards Fund simpler and more streamlined, from 2001–02 all Standards Fund allocations will be grouped in six categories: School Improvement, Inclusion, Standards and Curriculum, Diversity and Excellence, Teachers and Support, and Capital and Infrastructure. The new arrangements were set out for Local Education Authorities in guidance issued on 22 September.

Open University

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the funding of the Open University for the past three years. [134409]

Mr. Wicks: The following table shows the funding the Open University has received from the Higher Education Funding Council for England in each of the last three years.

£

	United Kingdom		*England, Wales and Northern Ireland*	*Scotland*
HEFCE funding	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2000–01*
Total teaching	115,810,756	121,360,509	119,496,105	12,526,559
Total research	7,248,003	6,874,165	6,888,267	—
Special funding	541,734	—	300,000	235,300
Total resource	123,600,493	128,234,674	126,684,372	12,761,859

The figures in the last year are not directly comparable to the earlier years. Responsibility for funding Open University students in Scotland now lies with the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and this funding is shown separately in the table.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his policy with regard to intervention under section 497 of the Education Act 1996 where a local education authority does not specify hours of support in a statement of special educational needs. [134454]

Jacqui Smith: Although the Education Act 1996 requires a local education authority to specify the special educational provision for a child, it does not require a local education authority to detail that provision in terms of hours of support. Where parents disagree with the wording or provision set out in their child's statement of special educational needs, it is open for them to appeal to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal. Where parents have complaints about the delivery of their child's provision, they may ask the Secretary of State to intervene. He will consider what action is appropriate in each case.

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent representations he has received from national organisations about the extent to which Essex County Council complies with the SEN Code of Practice. [134455]

Jacqui Smith: The Secretary of State has received correspondence from the Independent Panel for Special Educational Advice (IPSEA) questioning the extent to which Essex County Council complies with the SEN Code of Practice. As with all such correspondence, officials are investigating the matter.

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to what extent local education authorities are required to have regard to the SEN Code of Practice. [134456]

Jacqui Smith: Local education authorities are required by law to have regard to the SEN Code of Practice. The Code offers guidance to local education authorities on their responsibilities towards children with special educational needs, and they must not ignore it. Authorities must decide how to fulfil their statutory duties and responsibilities in the light of the Code.

Police Hotline

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will establish a system in which each school has access to a hotline to the police. [134521]

Jacqui Smith: DfEE worked closely with the police and the Home Office on the production of "School Security: Dealing With Troublemakers", which promotes close co-operation between schools and local police to create effective local partnerships. Specifically, it recommends that schools and the local police should ensure that arrangements for calling police help in an emergency have been properly communicated to staff, and are understood.

We know that local education authorities and schools have established links with their local police forces. If a hotline is needed in addition to existing practices, schools and local education authorities are best placed to discuss this with their local police forces.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* women and *(b)* members of ethnic minorities are employed by his Department. [134689]

Mr. Wills: Details of the number of women and members of ethnic minorities employed by DfEE are as set out. The figures for permanent and temporary (casual) staff are shown separately.

Permanent staff

As at 1 October 2000 DfEE employed 4,849 permanent staff of whom:

2,693 (56 per cent.) were women and

491 (10 per cent.) were members of ethnic minorities

Temporary staff

As at 1 October 2000 DfEE employed 237 temporary staff of whom:

133 (56 per cent.) were women and

5 (2 per cent.) were members of ethnic minorities.

DfEE (in line with the Commission for Racial Equality guidelines) asks staff to voluntarily declare their ethnicity in order to monitor progress against its Equal Opportunities Action Plan. The figures reflect the position for those who have provided this information.

Circulars and Consultation Documents

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the cost was to his Department of the publication and distribution of circulars and consultation documents in *(a)* 1997–98 *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [134711]

Mr. Wills: Full information in the form requested is not available. Details of the costs of production of such materials are not specifically categorised as circulars or consultations by the Department and are therefore not collected centrally. Instead information on marketing and publicity products is recorded for each particular marketing campaign and broken down by the type of media employed to deliver the information.

Teacher Training

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the quality of teacher training in England and Wales. [134712]

Ms Estelle Morris: All initial teacher training (ITT) providers in England are subject to regular inspection of the quality of their provision by Ofsted. The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) allocates funding to ITT providers, according to the quality of provision, based on Ofsted's judgments.

A new teacher training curriculum was introduced in England in 1998. The proportion of trainees in high quality primary ITT provision has increased from 56 per cent. in 1997 to 65 per cent. in 1999.

Teacher training in Wales is a matter for the Welsh Assembly.

Citizenship Classes

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for citizenship classes. [134726]

Jacqui Smith: Citizenship education will be part of the National Curriculum for secondary schools from August 2002. It follows the recommendation of the all-party working party chaired by Prof. Bernard Crick and including Lord Baker in its membership. Citizenship is designed to improve the knowledge and understanding of our democracy among young people, to make them aware of their social and moral responsibilities and to encourage greater community involvement. We have made £12 million available to schools this year through the Standards Fund to assist them in their preparations for Citizenship. This will be sustained next year.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if his proposed citizenship classes will be subject to a requirement of political impartiality. [134925]

Jacqui Smith: Citizenship education will be subject to the same requirements of political impartiality as other areas of the curriculum. There are safeguards in law to guard against biased or unbalanced teaching. Local education authorities, governing bodies and head teachers are required under Section 407 of the Education Act 1996 to take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views. The introduction of citizenship was proposed by the Citizenship Education Working Party that included Lord Baker, the former education secretary.

Unruly Pupils

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to issue new guidelines for teachers on the legitimate physical restraint of unruly pupils. [134727]

Jacqui Smith: DfEE Circular 10/98 makes it clear that teachers may use reasonable force to control or restrain pupils to prevent them from causing injury to themselves or others, and contains guidance on appropriate physical intervention measures.

We plan to issue complementary guidance shortly, to help schools and local education authorities plan their strategies for managing the behaviour of pupils with severe behavioural difficulties.

Internet Access

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to reduce the cost of internet access to schools. [134778]

Mr. Wills: The cost of providing internet access to school is subject to a number of factors, including the availability of relevant services and competition in the market. My officials are in contact with Oftel regarding the telecommunications costs and tariffs and our Regional Broadband strategy is enabling local education authorities to seek the best possible procurement arrangements for internet service provision on behalf of their schools.

Resuscitation Policies

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance his Department issues to *(a)* local education authorities, *(b)* colleges, *(c)* private schools and *(d)* other educational establishments concerning the development and application of resuscitation policies; and how compliance with such guidance is monitored. [134843]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* DfEE's "Guidance on First Aid for Schools: a good practice guide" is freely available to all schools and can be referenced by other educational institutions. It sets out first aid requirements under health and safety legislation, and provides advice for schools on drawing up first aid policies and ensuring that they meet their statutory duties. Specifically, it advises that first aid training should include resuscitation procedures for children. Breaches of health and safety legislation are subject to investigation by the Health and Safety Executive.

Tutor-student Ratio

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the average tutor to student ratio in *(a)* sixth-form colleges and *(b)* further education colleges in each local education authority area. [134901]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not readily available by local education authority areas.

University Funding (Research)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much funding each university in England and Wales has received towards research in each of the past five years. [134912]

Mr. Wicks: The funding of higher education in Wales is now a matter for the National Assembly. The information requested can be found in the Higher Education Statistics Agency publication "Resources for higher education institutions" copies of which are in the Library of the House.

GCSEs

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he or his officials have had with representatives of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference concerning their recent assessment of the value of GCSEs. [134924]

Mr. Wicks: The Department has received no communication either from the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference or from individual members of the Conference about their assessment of the value of GCSEs.

Pupil Exclusions

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent assessment he has made of the effect on other children at school *(a)* academically and *(b)* emotionally of not excluding disruptive pupils. [134933]

Jacqui Smith: Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools' latest annual report shows a clear link between standards of behaviour and educational achievement.

We have made clear that Headteachers can permanently exclude pupils who are very disruptive or violent. And our recently issued new guidance for exclusion appeal panels indicates that the Headteacher's decision to exclude should not be overridden in a range of circumstances including where there is violence or the threat of violence.

In addition, we are making provision for over 1,000 on-site Learning Support Units by 2002, to ensure that disruptive pupils are removed from the classroom quickly so they do not disrupt other pupils' education.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils in state schools were permanently excluded in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [134707]

Jacqui Smith: The latest available data on permanent exclusions are shown in the following table. Data on permanent exclusions in the school year 1999–2000 will be collected in January 2001 and published in May 2001 (provisional date).

Further information on permanent exclusions will be published at the end of November 2000 in a Statistical Bulletin, a copy of which will be placed in the Library.

We are providing £174 million next year to help schools and LEAs tackle exclusion—a third more than in 1999–2000 and 10 times more than in 1996–97. This is helping to pay for more than 1,000 on-site Learning Support Units which take disruptive pupils out of the classroom quickly, improve their behaviour and reduce the need for exclusion. Where an exclusion is necessary, provision for excluded pupils is being greatly increased. There are now 1,000 more places and 250 more teachers in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) than in 1997. The quality of PRUs is improving and by 2002 all local education authorities will be required to provide a full timetable for excluded pupils.

Numbers of permanent exclusions in schools in England 1996–97 to 1998–99[1]

	Number
1998–99	10,438
1997–98	12,298
1996–97	12,668

[1] Includes Maintained Primary, Secondary, Special and Non-maintained Special Schools

Source:
January Schools' Census

School Security

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement about physical security at *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools. [134937]

Jacqui Smith: DfEE has issued guidance on "Improving School Security" and also makes available a school security grant for local education authorities to allocate on the basis of risk assessments at individual schools. The total amount available, with the assistance of the Government grant (at 75 per cent.), is £22 million a year. The grant is allocated by formula. The grant is to supplement existing expenditure by local education authorities and schools on school security measures. It is for local education authorities to determine local priorities of use of their grant allocation, including distribution to schools and training needs. All maintained schools, including Pupil Referral Units and nursery schools, are eligible to receive funding from the grant. The grant may be used on physical measures to improve the security of school premises and on security related training for staff and governors.

Teachers (Cannabis)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his policy is towards the employment of teaching staff who have convictions for cannabis consumption. [134941]

Ms Estelle Morris: Unless the Secretary of State has barred a person from employment as a teacher, it is for the prospective employer to decide on the suitability of an applicant for a teaching post. In reaching those decisions employers will take into account any information about the applicant's previous convictions that is revealed by a criminal record check. The Department's Circular 9/93 (first issued in 1993 and still in effect), which gives guidance about the procedures for obtaining such checks, advises employers that convictions for sexual, violent, or drugs offences will be particularly strong contra-indications for work with children, but that they will also need to consider the age and seriousness of the offence.

Assisted Places Scheme

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact of the abolition of the Assisted Places Scheme on class sizes. [134942]

Ms Estelle Morris: The annual cost of maintaining infant classes of 30 and below, around £160 million, will be met from savings made as a result of the phasing out of the Assisted Places Scheme. We are well on track to deliver our pledge to limit infant classes to 30 pupils. Allocations so far to Hampshire LEA amount to some £7 million. This has helped the LEA to reduce the size of the average Key Stage 1 class in the New Forest constituency to 26.7. In January 1997 the figure was 27.3.

Academic Standards

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent assessment his Department has made of the relationship between academic standards in examinations and *(a)* class sizes and *(b)* money spent per pupil. [134943]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available evidence, including from Ofsted, indicates that class size is most important at Key Stage 1. That is why we have pledged to reduce the size of infant classes. The pledge will ensure that all children benefit from infant classes of 30 or below, and will help to give young pupils the important start they need. The Department's Value for Money Unit is examining the relationship between school resourcing and academic standards in education.

School Uniforms

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages of schoolchildren wearing school uniforms. [135034]

Jacqui Smith: The Government believe that school uniforms can make a valuable contribution to the identity and discipline of schools. It is, however, for school governors to decide whether there should be a uniform, and we believe that this should remain the case.

Learning Difficulties

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many children in each LEA are in *(a)* moderate learning difficulty schools, *(b)* severe learning difficulty schools and *(c)* educational and behavioural difficulties schools, broken down into (i) primary and (ii) secondary sectors; [135135]

(2) what percentage of children in each LEA are in *(a)* moderate learning difficulty schools, *(b)* severe learning difficulty schools and *(c)* educational and behavioural difficulties schools, broken down into (i) primary and (ii) secondary sectors, as a proportion of the overall number of children in each sector. [135136]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information is not available in the form requested.

Some information on special needs was recently published in the statistical volume "Statistics of Education—Schools in England 2000" in September. A copy of this publication is available from the Library and can also be accessed on the Department's statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics. More comprehensive information about special educational needs in schools in England will be published in a statistical bulletin "Special Educational Needs in England 2000" on 22 November.

"Voices"

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much his Department spent on advertising space in the recent Government publication, "Voices". [135585]

Mr. Wills: The Department took advertising space at a cost of £4,662 in "Voices" magazine.

Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the objectives of the Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund. [135218]

Ms Hodge: The main objectives of the Challenge Fund are to help employers from the public, private and voluntary sectors introduce and develop effective flexible working policies and practices which both benefit the business and help their employees achieve a better balance between work and the rest of their lives; and to identify and disseminate best practice widely to other employers.

Young People (Disadvantage)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements the Government are making for the parliamentary accountability of the Children's Fund and of the Government's strategy to co-ordinate services for tackling disadvantage among children and young people. [135861]

Mr. Blunkett: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced on 28 July that he was establishing a new Cabinet Ministerial Group on Children and Young People's Services which would be chaired by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer with myself as Vice Chair, and which would be supported by a new cross-cutting Children and Young People's Unit to be located in the Department for Education and Employment.

He also appointed the Minister of State, Home Office, my right hon Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) as Minister for Young People with day to day responsibility for the Unit and the co-ordination of the Government's strategy in England on vulnerable children and young people.

The Children's Fund will form a major new part of the Government's strategy to tackle child poverty and prevent social exclusion. The Fund will support services to work with children and their families and prevent children and young people falling into drug abuse, truancy, unemployment and crime. It will be worth a total of £450 million over three years.

The new interdepartmental Children and Young People's Unit, based in my Department, will run the Children's Fund in England at official level. The Unit's remit will be set by the new Cabinet Ministerial Group on Children and Young People's Services. The Unit will have its own Request for Resources within my Department's Estimate. The Head of the Children and Young People's Unit, once appointed, will be an additional Accounting Officer within my Department. As is usual, the appointment as additional Accounting Officer will be made by the Treasury and a copy of the letter of appointment, setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of the additional Accounting Officer and the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Education and Employment as Principal Accounting Officer, will be sent to the Comptroller and Auditor General and to the Clerk of the Committee of Public Accounts.

I shall be formally accountable to Parliament for the Children's Fund and the work of the Unit. However, my right hon. Friend, as Minister for Young People, will normally answer Parliamentary Questions on the Children's Fund and the Unit in this House, and in the case of Oral Questions will do so during Department for Education and Employment Question Time. The Government expect that the relevant Select Committees will normally wish to invite him to appear when they examine the Children's Fund and the Government's strategy on services to tackle disadvantage among children and young people. My noble Friend Baroness Blackstone will answer for the Government in another place.

My right hon. Friend, as Minister for Young People, is writing today to the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and the Chairmen of the Select Committees on Education and Employment, on Health and on Home Affairs, and the Government will liaise as necessary with the House authorities to ensure that these arrangements work well and secure effective accountability for this innovative policy.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Appointments Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council if the Appointments Commission will report annually to Parliament on the discharge of its functions. [133715]

Mrs. Beckett: Like all Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs), the Appointments Commission will publish an Annual Report. There is no requirement for this to be laid before Parliament, but the report will of course be placed in the Libraries of the House.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Driving Tests

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many driving tests were conducted per month since April 1999; how many tests can be carried out in a month; how many cancellations there were in each month since April 1999 and how many such cancellations were reallocated; and what was the average waiting time for driving tests in each month since April 2000 in the Norris Green and Southport Driving Test Centres. [134176]

Mr. Hill: The number of tests conducted at the driving test centres each month for the period May 1999 to September 2000 were as follows:

Month	*Norris Green*	*Southport*
May 1999	567	402
June 1999	652	408
July 1999	672	442
August 1999	692	351
September 1999	706	304
October 1999	790	359
November 1999	796	406
December 1999	635	408
January 2000	880	437
February 2000	723	375
March 2000	921	388
April 2000	709	363
May 2000	795	314
June 2000	878	384
July 2000	742	327
August 2000	885	363
September 2000	683	444

Note:
Figures for April 1999 are not available

The number of tests that can be conducted in an average month, based on the number of staff currently in post at the test centres, is:

Norris Green—778

Southport—516.

Test cancellation in each month since May 1999

Month	*Norris Green*	*Southport*
May 1999	1	20
June 1999	3	30
July 1999	2	6
August 1999	2	3
September 1999	2	23
October 1999	4	4
November 1999	23	4
December 1999	11	21
January 2000	14	14
February 2000	3	12
March 2000	6	3
April 2000	2	20
May 2000	6	24
June 2000	36	26

Test cancellation in each month since May 1999

Month	Norris Green	Southport
July 2000	1	9
August 2000	8	13
September 2000	26	7
Total	150	239

Note:
Cancellations are reallocated

Average waiting times for driving tests in each month since April 2000

Month	Norris Green	Southport
April	6 weeks	7 weeks
May	6 weeks	7 weeks
June	7 weeks	8 weeks
July	6 weeks	8 weeks
August	7 weeks	7 weeks
September	6 weeks	6 weeks

Late Payments

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what performance targets have been set to ensure that small businesses automatically receive interest from local authorities on late payments made after 30 days of being invoiced in line with the Late Payments of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998; [134114]

(2) what recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on compensation for payment by public bodies after 30 days of invoices from small firms. [134115]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 1999, local authorities are required to report annually their performance against specified best value performance indicators. One such indicator is the percentage of undisputed invoices which were paid in 30 days. The Government have specified, in statutory guidance, the following targets for local authorities in respect of that best value indicator:

Financial year	Percentage of invoices paid within 30 days
2000–01	95.0
2001–02	97.5
2002–03	100.0

I also refer my hon. Friend to the replies given by my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce on 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 9–10W, and my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 24 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 109W.

M6

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the costs of repairs and maintenance to the elevated section of the M6 through Birmingham in each year from 1990 to 1999. [134160]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Tim Matthews, to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Letter from David York to Mr. Andrew Welsh, dated 30 October 2000:

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Keith Hill, has asked the Chief Executive to reply to your recent question about the cost of repairs and maintenance to the elevated section of the M6 through Birmingham between 1990 and 1999. I am replying in the absence of Tim Matthews.

This section of the M6 is part of the Midland Links Motorway Viaducts and I am afraid our records are not kept in a form which allows us to disaggregate costs for individual sections.

The costs of maintaining the structures on the Midlands Links Motorway Viaducts are set out in the attached table. We estimate that the cost of maintaining the elevated section of M6 through the Greater Birmingham area, roughly between Junction 5 at Castle Bromwich and Junction 9 at Bescot, is about two thirds of the figures shown in the table.

The costs exclude VAT and do not include for routine maintenance and repair of the road surfaces. Nor do they include costs associated with lighting, environmental works or communication systems. These figures could only be produced at a disproportionate cost.

If you would like further details, the contact at the Agency is David Cropper. His telephone number is 0121–678 8482.

Cost of repairing and maintaining structures on the Midland Links Motorway Viaducts

Financial year	£ million
1998–99	27.4
1997–98	19.2
1996–97	14.0
1995–96	27.7
1994–95	26.3
1993–94	21.0
1992–93	17.7
1991–92	20.7
1990–91	19.8

Asbestosis

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people have died as a result of asbestosis in each of the last three years. [134813]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Executive maintains a register of deaths in Great Britain for which asbestosis is mentioned on the death certificate. The number of asbestosis deaths (excluding death certificates also mentioning mesothelioma) in each of the last three years is as shown.

	Number of death certificates mentioning asbestosis
1996	196
1997	190
1998	165

Figures for 1999 are not yet available.

Health and Safety

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many companies have been prosecuted for breaches of health and safety legislation in each of the last three years. [134814]

Mr. Meacher: The number of companies (excluding individuals and others with health and safety duties) prosecuted for breaches of health and safety legislation following investigation by HSE in each of the last three years is as set out.

HSE

	Number of companies prosecuted
1999–2000[1,2]	748
1998–99[1]	716
1997–98[1]	643

[1] Data from 1 April to 31 March
[2] Provisional

Local authorities enforce health and safety legislation in relation to several kinds of premises. Local authorities provide information on prosecutions, but do not classify this by type of organisation. The number of separate breaches, by all kinds of employers and others, prosecuted following local authority investigation in each of the last three years is as set out.

Local authorities

	Number of breaches
1999–2000	[1]—
1998–99[2]	424
1997–98[2]	506

[1] Not yet available
[2] Data from 1 April to 31 March

Transatlantic Air Routes

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of increasing competition on transatlantic air routes on British consumers and business. [134335]

Mr. Mullin: Increased competition on transatlantic air routes will bring benefits to British consumers, to business and to the wider economy. But competition must be fair. We shall continue to press the US to rescind those protectionist measures which, by denying to UK carriers effective access to their domestic market, serve to inhibit fair competition on transatlantic routes.

Housing Stock Transfers

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the total amount is *(a)* of early redemption penalties and *(b)* overhanging debt paid from central Government funds to enable the transfer of council housing to registered social landlords; and if he will list the advantages of early redemption of debt. [134731]

Mr. Mullin: Under the arrangements for dealing with overhanging debt announced to the House by my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning on 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 250W, local authorities are responsible for meeting the cost of early redemption penalties either from the capital receipt arising from the transfer of housing stock or from within their existing resources. Since the arrangements came into force we have made one-off payments to Burnley Borough Council and Coventry City Council to assist them to repay outstanding principal of their Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) loans. The sum total of both payments was £132.696 million.

The advantages of early debt redemption are twofold. First, a mechanism to deal with overhanging debt makes housing transfer a realistic option for a wider range of authorities where investment is most needed. I understand that the total capital investment over the next 30 years in the housing stock transferred by Coventry City Council and Burnley Borough Council is estimated to be over £1 billion. Second, a one-off payment to assist an authority to repay outstanding PWLB loans is simpler—for both local and central government—than the alternative of leaving an authority's Housing Revenue Account open, despite the transfer of stock, and for the Exchequer to subsidise the overhanging debt for many years.

Rail Safety

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to bring about a public sector involvement in the railway industry for safety reasons. [134466]

Mr. Hill: The Government have always made safety the top priority in the railways. All sections of the industry are under obligations to carry out their operations in a safe manner. We look to the Health and Safety Executive, as the sole regulator for rail safety, to ensure that the railways are operating safely.

Global Warming

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his Department's assessment is of the causes of global warming. [135030]

Mr. Meacher: Recent research at the Hadley Centre, one of the world's leading climate research centres and funded by my Department, has shown that both natural and man made factors have contributed to the global rise in temperature of 0.6 deg C since 1860. The strong warming since the mid 1970s can only be explained by taking into account the effects of human activities on the atmosphere.

Rail Distribution (Brighton)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action *(a)* he and *(b)* the regulatory authorities propose following the disruption at Brighton Station on the evening of 20 October; and if he will make a statement. [134660]

Mr. Hill: The incident referred to occurred at 19.43 on Friday 20 October 2000 on the Mainline between Brighton and Preston Park when passengers alighted from trains which had stopped between stations after a traction failure on a Thameslink train, followed by a loss of the infrastructure traction supply. HSE is awaiting an industry report before deciding what further action to take.

Waste Recycling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make

a statement on the applicability of News Release 609, "Recycling Key to Future PFI Waste Applications", to the PFI credits earmarked for use by East Sussex County Council and Brighton and Hove Council. [134621]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The project already agreed with East Sussex County Council and Brighton and Hove Council will not be affected by the revised criteria for PFI waste schemes announced in News Release 609. The PFI contract will need to contribute towards the overall achievement of the statutory performance standards for recycling of household waste which we announced in Waste Strategy 2000. These will require authorities, on average, to double their recycling in three years and nearly triple it in five years.

Wembley Task Force

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions since April 2000 the Wembley Task Force has met; and if he will list those present at each meeting. [134835]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* Wembley Task Force has met five times since 1 April 2000 and those present at each meeting were:

Date of the Meeting: 4 April 2000

Chairman—Sir Nigel Mobbs
Deputy Chairman—Councillor Paul Daisley (LBB)
Acting Chief Executive—Tony Winterbottom (EP)
David Shelton (EP)
Geoff Taylor (WNSL)
Ian Fytche (SE)
Mariana Spater (WPSRB)
Observers
John Sienkeiwicz (GOL)
Niall Mackenzie (DCMS)
Jonathan Branson (Sport England)
Gareth Daniel (LBB)
Richard Saunders (LBB)
Kieran McStravick (EP)
Ann Garrett (EP)

Date of the Meeting: 12 May 2000

Chairman—Sir Nigel Mobbs
Deputy Chairman—Councillor Paul Daisley (LBB)
Acting Chief Executive—Tony Winterbottom (EP)
David Shelton (EP)
Eric Sorensen (LDP)
Bob Stubbs (WNSL)
Mariana Spater (WPSRB)
Jonathan Branson (SE)
Observers
John Sienkeiwicz (GOL)
Ralph Ward (GOL)
Niall Mackenzie (DCMS)
Richard Saunders (LBB)
Chris Walker (LBB)
Geoff Taylor (WNSL)
Kieran McStravick (EP)
Ann Garrett (EP)
Wembley plc Presentation Team
Nigel Potter (Wembley plc)
John Garside (Wembley plc)
Andrew Morris (Richard Rogers Partnership)
Jon Coxeter-Smith (Davis Langdon and Everest)
Development Framework Presentation Team
Robin Buckle (LBB)
Andrew Hiorns (David Lock Associates)

Date of the Meeting: 29 June 2000

Chairman—Sir Nigel Mobbs
Deputy Chairman—Councillor Paul Daisley (LBB)
Acting Chief Executive—Tony Winterbottom (EP)
David Shelton (EP)
Eric Sorensen (LDP)
Bob Stubbs (WNSL)
Ian Fytche (SE)
Observers
John Sienkeiwicz (GOL)
Ralph Ward (GOL)
Niall Mackenzie (DCMS)
Ian O'Neill (DCMS)
Richard Saunders (LBB)
Geoff Taylor (WNSL)
Jonathan Branson (SE)
Kieran McStravick (EP)
Guy Thornett (EP)
Ann Garrett (EP)

Date of the Meeting: 27 September 2000

Chairman—Sir Nigel Mobbs
Deputy Chairman—Paul Daisley (LBB)
Acting Chief Executive—Tony Winterbottom (LDA)
Mike Appleton (EP)
Mariana Spater (WPSRB)
Observers
Ian O'Neill (DCMS)
Gareth Daniel (LBB)
Richard Saunders (LBB)
Jonathan Branson (SE)
Kieran McStravick (LDA)

Date of the Meeting: 25 October 2000

Chairman—Sir Nigel Mobbs
Deputy Chairman—Councillor Paul Daisley (LBB)
Acting Chief Executive—Tony Winterbottom (LDA)
Mike Appleton (EP)
John Duffy (GLA)
Derek Casey (Sport England) (?)
Mariana Spater (WPP)
Observers
Niall Mackenzie (DCMS)
Ian O'Neill (DCMS)
Ian Fytche or Jonathan Branson (Sport England)
Geoff Raw (LBB)
Ralph Ward (LDA) (?)
Guy Thornett (LDA)
Kieran McStravick (LDA).

Airline Passengers (Health)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice his Department gives to airlines concerning the health of passengers on *(a)* short and *(b)* long-distance flights. [134422]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* We are currently awaiting the results of the inquiry by the House of Lords Science and Technology Sub-Committee on the aircraft cabin environment.

The focus of existing advice is to inform airline passengers of the possible health risks posed by air travel and to allow them to take any necessary precautions. The "Health Advice for Travellers" booklet, issued by the Department of Health has been recently updated and includes references to the potential health risks of air travel, such as deep vein thrombosis. Approximately 12 million copies of this booklet are printed and made available to long and short haul travellers each year, usually through post offices, and it is also available on the internet and on CEEFAX. The "Health Information for Overseas Travel" booklet issued to all GPs is also being updated and will include advice on the risk of deep vein thrombosis.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent investigations his Department has carried out into the health problems associated with long-distance travel. [135132]

Mr. Mullin: In the light of evidence given during the House of Lords Science and Technology Sub-Committee on the aircraft cabin environment, we have commissioned an independent study on passenger health on board aircraft. The study, which should be completed by next spring will cover long and short haul travel. The intention of the study is to bring together existing research with a view to identifying where there are gaps in current knowledge.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce regulations to ensure a minimum requirement of space for seating in aircraft. [135134]

Mr. Mullin: The UK already has an airworthiness requirement for minimum seat space, and is unique in this respect. The Civil Aviation Authority which is responsible for the safety regulation of UK registered passenger aircraft, has set standards for seat spacing on UK registered aircraft since 1989. There is also a limit on the number of seats in each row which determines the minimum width of seats.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to regulate air transport to ensure that, on long-haul flights, the health of passengers is protected. [135133]

Mr. Mullin: The recent inquiry by the House of Lords Science and Technology Sub-Committee on the aircraft cabin environment looked into the health effects of travelling in commercial aircraft. We are currently awaiting the results of the inquiry and will study any recommendations it makes before considering the possibility of regulation.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the risks of thrombosis on long-haul flights; and what guidance he plans to issue to the air passenger industry to reduce such risks. [134634]

Mr. Mullin: We are currently awaiting the results of the inquiry by the House of Lords Science and Technology Sub-Committee on the aircraft cabin environment.

In the light of the evidence given during the inquiry, we have commissioned an independent study on passenger health on board aircraft, including the risk of thrombosis. The study, which should be completed by next spring, will bring together existing research with a view to identifying where there are gaps in current knowledge.

The focus of current guidance on the possible risks of air travel, such as deep vein thrombosis, is to inform passengers of when there may be risks and to allow them to take any necessary precautions. The 'Health Advice for Travellers' booklet, issued by the Department of Health, has been recently updated and includes references to potential risks. The latest version was issued in September and contains advice on deep vein thrombosis. Approximately 12 million copies of this booklet are printed and made available to long and short haul travellers each year, usually through Post Offices, and it is also available on the internet and on CEEFAX. The 'Health Information for Overseas Travel' booklet issued to all GPs is also being updated and will include advice on the risk of deep vein thrombosis.

Vehicle Emissions

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action is being taken at the EU level to reduce harmful gas and other emissions in the transport sector. [135394]

Mr. Meacher: Since 1993 the EU has introduced, a series of increasingly stringent emissions standards for new road vehicles. Further tightening will take effect in 2001 and 2006. EU Directive 98/70/EC requires petrol and diesel fuels to meet cleaner specifications from 1 January 2000. Further reductions in permitted sulphur and aromatics content in petrol and sulphur content in diesel will apply from 2005. Taken together these measures will have a significant role in helping us to meet our national air quality objectives and our legal obligations under the various EU Air Quality Directives.

The European Commission has put in place a voluntary agreement with motor manufacturers to reduce emissions of CO2 from the average new car by 25 per cent. by 2008–09.

South Downs National Park

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received regarding the future role of local authority planning powers within the area covered by the proposed South Downs National Park. [134849]

Mr. Meacher: *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), met with local MPs and a delegation representing local authorities in the South

Downs on 12 October 1999, and listened to views expressed about the exercise of planning powers within a possible National Park. Since then Ministers have received a number of representations on this subject.

The Countryside Agency, which is considering the possible designation of a National Park in the South Downs, has been asked by the Government to look carefully at ways in which town and country planning powers might be exercised. A range of options for planning administration has been identified and the Agency will now consult with the local authorities and other interested local parties before making recommendations to the Secretary of State in due course.

Cowboy Builders

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what projects his Department is supporting connected with the First Check Point organisation to combat incompetent and dishonest builders. [134632]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The Department is providing funding for two pilot projects in Birmingham and Somerset for the Quality Mark scheme which badges competent and reliable builders and allied traders and enables consumers to avoid the incompetent and dishonest. The Department welcomes other initiatives which offer some measure of help to consumers to make an informed choice of builder or tradesman, including projects connected with the First Check Point organisation.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what funding has been made available by his Department to projects concerned with combating incompetent and dishonest builders. [135137]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department is providing funding for two pilot projects in Birmingham and Somerset for the Quality Mark scheme which badges competent and reliable builders and allied traders and enables consumers to avoid the incompetent and dishonest. The Department welcomes other initiatives which offer some measure of help to consumers to make an informed choice of builder or tradesman, including projects connected with the First Check Point organisation.

Local Government Funding (Transport)

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the element of SSA was for each local authority in England for subsidy of public transport services. [135095]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Public transport support is one of the services covered within the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services (EPCS) block of Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs). With a few exceptions (rent allowance payments, housing benefit administration, flood defence, coast protection, and national parks) services are not dealt with on an individual basis within this block of SSAs. Therefore, it is not possible to say what the element for public transport subsidy was.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent consultations he has held with the European Commission regarding the terms of the rebates under the climate change levy; and if he will make a statement. [135053]

Mr. Meacher: In October, my officials attended both a multilateral meeting on the revision of the state aid guidelines and a bilateral on the UK's state aids notification, in respect of reductions offered under the Climate Change Levy Agreements. The Government remain optimistic of success for the levy's state aid applications.

Research Projects

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on his Department's contribution to *(a)* the High Frequency Active Auroral Research Programme and *(b)* the European Incoherent Scatter Radar Project, stating in each case the (i) nature, (ii) duration and (iii) purpose of the contribution, including how many staff were attached to the projects and what financial support was given; [134232]

(2) if he will list the ionospheric research projects in which his Department is involved, stating in each case *(a)* the number of personnel involved, *(b)* the duration of the project and *(c)* the yearly and total project cost to his Department; and if he will make a statement; [134233]

(3) what assessment his Department has made as to the environmental effects of ionospheric research; and if he will make a statement; [134234]

(4) if he will make a statement on his Department's contribution to the Scientific and Technological Options Assessment Panel's investigation into the local, global and public health risks of ionospheric research. [134236]

Mr. Mullin: The Department has had no involvement in ionospheric research and has not carried out or contributed to any assessments or investigations of possible environmental and public health effects. My understanding is that the Scientific and Technological Assessment Panel do not currently have a study on this topic.

Affordable Housing

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will change the definition of affordable housing used in planning guidance to ensure that all affordable housing planning policies *(a)* are consistent between local authorities and *(b)* enable local authorities to provide benefits and discounts in perpetuity. [135797]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Planning Policy Guidance note 3: "Housing" and Circular 6/98 "Planning and Affordable Housing" provide detailed guidance to local planning authorities on formulating development plan policies on affordable housing. While planning policy should not be expressed in favour of any particular form of tenure, the particular amount and type of affordable housing to be provided in individual developments will be for the local authority to decide based on their own assessment of local needs, and in negotiation with

developers. Planning obligations may be used to ensure that affordable housing provided through planning policy is secured, either initially or in perpetuity, for occupation by people in need of such housing. We have no plans at present to revise the guidance.

Traffic Noise

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what measures his Department has taken to assist the introduction of barriers to reduce traffic noise; [135148]

(2) what actions his Department has taken to introduce noise attenuation methods where traffic is concerned. [135146]

Mr. Hill: One of the main methods of mitigating and attenuating traffic noise is to reduce the noise emitted by new vehicles. The Department has a continuing involvement in negotiating EU directives in this area. These measures have already delivered a substantial reduction in noise levels from new vehicles. A large lorry today makes no more noise than a car of the early 1970s and three modern cars now make less noise than one 1970s model. These measures will bring improvements as the vehicle fleet is renewed. Negotiations on further noise reduction are likely to focus on heavy vehicles such as trucks and buses.

In addition the Department has recently been involved in negotiating an EU directive to limit tyre noise, the dominant source of noise from traffic at speeds above 40 miles per hour. This directive is expected to be adopted shortly.

£5 million a year ring-fenced budget is being spent to mitigate and attenuate noise, primarily using barriers, at locations on the national network where detailed studies have confirmed the severity of the problem and shown that barriers are the most effective solution in the short term. As indicated in my reply to my hon. Friend on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 427W, studies have been commissioned at a large number of locations. The Highways Agency will be dealing with nearly all of these locations over the next few years. In a number of cases where the road has been reassessed for resurfacing, the use of quieter materials has affected the priority for other measures.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by area those schemes assisted by his Department to introduce noise barriers for traffic, stating his Department's financial contribution in each case. [135149]

Mr. Hill: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 11 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 681W, which included a letter from the then Chief Executive, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw). The Department will bear the whole cost of the works that it considers necessary.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's policy towards traffic noise. [135147]

Mr. Hill: An Integrated Transport White Paper explained that we need to gain a better understanding of the effects of transport noise and expect advances in technology to provide some reductions in the impact of noise from road traffic. It is for local authorities to decide what further measures would be appropriate on their roads. My policies as highway authority for the strategic national road network were set out in "A New Deal for Trunk Roads" which was published along with the White Paper in July 1998. This states that quieter surfaces are to be used for all new trunk road schemes and resurfacing existing roads in an area where noise was a matter of concern. The Ten Year Plan for Transport, published in July, should enable the Highways Agency to install by 2011 quieter surfaces on over 60 per cent. of the national road network including all concrete stretches. In addition, funds are to be ring-fenced to permit the Highways Agency to provide over the next ten years other measures such as noise barriers in some of the worst and most pressing cases where there is no immediate need for the road to be resurfaced.

Compulsory Purchase

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend regulations concerning local authority powers for compulsory purchase of buildings to facilitate regeneration. [135566]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The final report of the expert Advisory Group set up to undertake a fundamental review of the laws and procedures relating to compulsory purchase and compensation were published on 27 July 2000. Copies of the report were placed in the Library. The Group concluded that new legislation was needed to clarify and modernise CPO powers, procedures and compensation provisions, while retaining the present approach of ensuring that individual rights are protected. Comments on the Advisory Group's conclusions were invited by 13 October. We will now consider the proposals put forward by the Group, the comments made on them and all other suggestions made in the course of the review. I hope that we will be in a position to make an announcement on proposals for reform early in the new year. This will include consideration of local authority powers in relation to regeneration.

Flood Plains

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given to local planning authorities on development on flood plains. [135131]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning announced on 13 April 2000, *Official Report*, columns 249–50W, the publication of a consultation draft of a new Planning Policy Note 25, "Development and flood risk". This set out proposals to strengthen the existing policy, which seeks to avoid inappropriate development in areas of flood risk. The draft is currently being revised in the light of consultation responses as well as any lessons to be learned from the recent flooding incidents. The new guidance is expected to be published in December this year.

Official Journeys

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many official journeys he has made on London Underground in the last *(a)* month, *(b)* three months and *(c)* six months; [135546]

(2) what proportion of his official journeys has been made by public transport in the last *(a)* month, *(b)* three months and *(c)* six months; [135545]

(3) how many official journeys he has made by bus in the last *(a)* month, *(b)* three months and *(c)* six months; [135548]

(4) how many official journeys he has made by rail in the last *(a)* month, *(b)* three months and *(c)* six months; [135549]

(5) what proportion of official journeys by his Department's ministers have been made by public transport in the last *(a)* month, *(b)* three months and *(c)* six months; [135550]

(6) what annual target has been set by his Department for the proportion of *(a)* Ministerial official journeys that should be taken by public transport and *(b)* all official journeys undertaken for his Department that should be taken by public transport. [135551]

Mr. Prescott: Ministers travel by public transport of all kinds on a regular basis on official visits.

Ministers are required under the Ministerial Code to always make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements.

"Voices"

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much his Department spent on advertising space in the recent Government publication, "Voices". [135587]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We purchased a page of advertising in support of our 'are you doing your bit?' campaign. The campaign aims to encourage individuals to take actions to save energy and help the environment. As part of this campaign, we have placed advertising in several women's magazines. The cost of advertising in the November issue of "Voices" was £5,477.85 including VAT.

Railway Crossings

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* reported accidents and *(b)* accidents resulting in fatalities involving vehicles on railway crossings have occurred in Britain in each of the past five years. [135743]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is shown in the table, supplied by the Health and Safety Executive's HM Railway Inspectorate.

Year	*Number of trains running into animals, gates or vehicles at level crossings*	*Number of fatalities involving road vehicles on level crossings*
1995–96	37	5
1996–97	33	0
1997–98	34	3
1998–99	37	3
1999–2000	32	2
Total	173	13

Comprehensive data and analysis can be found in HM Chief Inspector of Railways Annual Report's on Railway Safety in Great Britain. Copies are available in both House Libraries.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will initiate a general review of the safety of barrier-less crossings of railway lines following the conclusion of inquiries into the fatal accident on the railway crossing at Porthmadog on 23 October. [135806]

Mr. Hill: The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) Railway Inspectorate Inspector visited the site after the accident and was satisfied that the crossing is working correctly. I understand that an independent check of the crossing lights controls and the audible warning devices was also conducted, and they were found to be in good condition. HSE's Railway Inspectorate are now assisting the British Transport Police (BTP) with their investigation. Once this investigation has been concluded HSE will consider whether any further action for this type of level crossing is required.

Harrogate-York Rail Service

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will instruct Railtrack to make the necessary infrastructure provision in order to establish a 30-minute service between Harrogate and York. [135073]

Mr. Hill: No. The Secretary of State has no powers to instruct Railtrack. The provision of such infrastructure is a matter in the first instance for Railtrack and the train operating company, Northern Spirit. Condition seven of Railtrack's network licence requires it to maintain, renew, replace, improve, enhance and develop the network to meet the reasonable requirements of train operators and funders. The licence is enforced by the Rail Regulator.

Subsidy may be provided to the train operator through the franchise, and, subject to the Transport Bill currently before Parliament, the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) may procure schemes from Railtrack. To qualify for support a scheme would have to meet the SRA's Planning Criteria.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Barristers (Earnings)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will *(a)* place in the Library a copy of the recent study carried out for his Department comparing the earnings of barristers with other public sector professions and *(b)* make a statement on the conclusions of the study. [134350]

Mr. Lock: Copies of the recent study into the comparison of barristers' income from public funds with other comparable professions in the public sector have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The study indicated that barristers were paid significantly more than members of other professions doing skilled and stressful jobs who were also paid from public funds. The conclusions of the research are being considered, together with other evidence available, in determining the level of rates payable to barristers for both publicly funded family and criminal work. The Lord Chancellor and I are currently considering the responses to proposals which have been made on such fees and will announce our conclusions shortly.

Judicial Appointments

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the recent document submitted to him by the Law Society on judicial appointments. [134330]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor welcomes the acknowledgement by the Law Society of the improvements in the judicial appointments system which he has introduced. He notes that the Law Society calls for the creation of an independent Judicial Appointments Commission. He has not ruled out further reform for the future but considers it appropriate to proceed with the implementation and evaluation of the changes recommended by Sir Leonard Peach in his scrutiny. As part of this programme of development, the post of the First Commissioner for Judicial Appointments has now been advertised.

Court Dress

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent discussions the Lord Chancellor has had with senior members of the judiciary concerning reform of court dress; and if he will make a statement. [134329]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor will discuss court dress with the higher judiciary on 14 November, but it is not a matter to which he attaches a high priority.

Access to Children (French Initiative)

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what his policy is towards the Initiative of the French Republic for a draft Council Regulation on the mutual enforcement of judgments on rights of access to children; and if he will make a statement. [135730]

Mr. Lock: The Government recognise the importance, as well as the difficulty, of enforcing access or contact arrangements in both domestic and international cases. Accordingly, we broadly support this initiative and will take a full part in the negotiations on this proposal, but recognise that further work is needed to ensure that the details are acceptable to the Government.

Land Registry Projects

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what reports or research or projects have been undertaken for the Land Registry in the last three years by Demograph. [135474]

Jane Kennedy: The Land Registry has had no reports, research or projects undertaken on its behalf by Demograph in the last three years.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Bicycles

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to require bicycles to be fitted with bells. [134523]

Mr. Hill: I have been asked to reply.

My Department is proposing to make bells on bicycles compulsory on bicycles at the point of sale and will be carrying out a public consultation on the draft regulations shortly.

Crime Statistics (Taunton)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were convicted in respect of *(a)* murder, *(b)* indictable offences and *(c)* non-indictable offences in each year since 1979 in the Taunton constituency. [134320]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Available information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Databases are given in the table. Due to disproportionate cost selected years only are given.

Number of offenders convicted at Taunton Deane Petty Sessional Division (PSD) or at the Crown court (where the committing magistrates court was Taunton Deane PSD) for certain offences, 1979, 1984, 1989, 1993–1999[1]

	Offence		
	Murder	*Indictable offences*	*Summary non-motoring offences*
1979	—	571	704
1984	—	724	924
1989	—	510	823
1993	—	505	683
1994	—	497	688
1995	—	450	781
1996	—	479	828
1997	—	566	792
1998	—	533	929
1999[1]	—	576	1,019

[1] Provisional

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what responses he has received to his letter to local authorities and chief constables of 15 October 1999 on the powers included in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; if he plans any amendment to the Act in the light of the responses; if he will place the responses in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [134871]

Mr. Straw: My letter of 15 October 1999 was an informal request to chief executives and local authorities asking whether there was anything to be learned from their experiences in using provisions contained in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and whether any good practice could be shared. I would not normally place copies of routine correspondence of this sort in the Library. As a result of that correspondence the Home Office and the Local Government Association jointly held 10 regional seminars to help spread good practice in using anti-social behaviour orders. The seminars also served as a consultation exercise for the issue of a model agreement, or protocol, for effective local co-operation in tackling anti-social behaviour. I launched this guidance on 28 June. Both the guidance and the seminars were well received, and indicated a widespread willingness to use anti-social behaviour orders.

We have given a commitment to review the operation of anti-social behaviour orders within two years of implementation. The review will start in the new year and its findings and recommendations will be published. We will decide whether it is necessary to make any amendments to the legislation once we have seen the research report.

Mental Health

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to instigate research into the extent to which people with mental health problems are denied access to the criminal justice system. [133810]

Mr. Boateng: We are not aware of a need for any such research.

Police Officers (Essex)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many funded police officers there are in the Essex Constabulary; and what is the total number of police officers in the force. [134246]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Chief Constable that the Essex Police have a funded establishment of 2,970 police officers and that on 15 October the force had 2,841 officers. In October Essex Police had 35 more officers than it had in March.

The Essex Police expect to recruit around 190 police officers this year which should allow them broadly to reach their target by the end of the financial year.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many animals, broken down by species, were used in experiments in the United Kingdom during each of the last five years for which figures are available; [134281]

(2) how many primates have been *(a)* used in scientific procedures and *(b)* killed during their use in scientific procedures during the last 10 years for which figures are available; [134278]

(3) how many experiments were conducted on animals in the United Kingdom during each of the last five years for which figures are available. [134280]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The number of animals, listed by species, used in scientific procedures in the United Kingdom for each of the last five years for which figures are available, is given in Table 1a in each of the publications Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Great Britain, and Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Northern Ireland, copies of which are in the Library. The same table for Great Britain also shows the number of primates used in scientific procedures each year (primates are not separately identified in the Northern Ireland statistics) but the statistics do not give any information on the number of primates killed during their use in scientific procedures.

The number of scientific procedures performed on living animals in the United Kingdom for each of the last five years for which figures are available, is given in Table 1 in each of the publications Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Great Britain, and Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Northern Ireland, copies of which are in the Library.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the compliance of Imutran with the terms of the special dispensation licensing their use of primates in scientific procedures in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [134279]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Section 5(6) of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 provides that a project licence authorising the use of cats, dogs, primates or equidae shall not be granted unless the Secretary of State is satisfied that no other species are suitable. I am aware of concerns about the use of primates in xenotransplantation research carried out under authorities granted under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 and I am considering the issues raised. I am not in a position to comment further at this stage.

Race Relations (Walsall)

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what funding has been given by his Department in the last 12 months for which figures are available to organisations in Walsall, including the local authority, to improve race relations and to enhance ethnic minority businesses and employment. [134259]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A total of £119,208 was paid to Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council in March 2000 under the former section 11 grant programme. This was to enable the Council to employ additional staff to help members of minority ethnic communities in Walsall overcome disadvantages of language, culture and religion

and to play a full part in the economic and social life of the local community. No other payments have been made during the past 12 months.

Special Advisers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many special advisers were on his Department's pay roll in each of the past three years; and what the cost to public funds was. [134643]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There have been two special advisers on the Home Office payroll in the three financial years since the 1997 General Election. The annual cost to the Department in each of those years was:

	£
1997–98[1]	108,065
1998–99	108,933
1999–2000	114,704

[1] From 6 May 1997

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which areas have been determined as having sufficiently high burglary rates to be eligible to participate in the extended home energy efficiency scheme for the provision of safety equipment; and what the threshold is for inclusion. [135818]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The eligible areas are all those police Basic Command Units in England that, according to the recorded crime figures published in January 2000, had a domestic burglary rate above the English average—i.e. at least 11 burglaries per 1,000 households in the six months between April and September 1999. Between them, these Basic Command Units account for almost 40 per cent. of all the households in England.

For Wales, separate arrangements are being made by the National Assembly.

The eligible Basic Command Units are as listed:

Police force	*Basic command unit*
Avon and Somerset	Central Bristol, North Bristol, South Bristol
Bedfordshire	Luton
Cambridgeshire	Northern
Cleveland	All
Derbyshire	Derby (D Division)
Devon and Cornwall	Torbay
Durham	Darlington
Gloucestershire	Cheltenham and Tewkesbury, Forest and Gloucester
Greater Manchester	All
Hampshire	Southampton
Humberside	Kingston upon Hull, North Lincolnshire, North-East Lincolnshire
Lancashire	Central, Pennine
Leicestershire	Central, West
Lincolnshire	West
London, City of	Bishopsgate
Merseyside	City and Kirkdale, South Liverpool, St. Helens, Walton and Croxteth, Wavertree and Riverside, West Derby and Tuebrook
Metropolitan Police	Barnet, Brent, Camden, Greenwich, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Lambeth, Lewisham, Newham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, Wandsworth, Westminster
North Yorkshire	Central
Northamptonshire	Eastern, Northampton
Northumbria	Gateshead East, Newcastle Central, Newcastle East, Newcastle West, South Tyneside, Sunderland City, Washington
Nottinghamshire	Carlton and West Bridgeford, City and Beeston, Mansfield and Ashfield, Radford Road, Hucknall and Arnold
South Yorkshire	Barnsley, Doncaster Central, Doncaster West, Rotherham East, Sheffield Attercliffe, Sheffield City Centre, Sheffield North, Sheffield South, Wombwell
Staffordshire	Stoke on Trent
Sussex	Brighton, Senlac
Thames Valley	Milton Keynes, Oxford, Reading and Wokingham, Slough and District
West Midlands	Erdington, Aston, Nechells, Saltley, Ward End, Sutton Coldfield, Castle Vale, Kingstanding, Stechford, Shard End, Bordesley Green, Bromford, Sheldon, Bournville, Bartley Green, Longbridge, Selly Oak, Frankley, Northfield, Kings Heath, Billesley, Kings Norton, Acocks Green, Sparkhill, Sparkbrook, Edgbaston, Balsall Heath, Selly Park, Moseley, F1—Birmingham City Centre, Digbeth, Soho, Winson Green, Harbourne, Ladywood, Quinton, Handsworth, Sandwell, Perry Barr, Aston (part), Wolverhampton Town Centre, Wolverhampton West, Whitmoreanes, Tettenhall, Penn, Wednesfield, Bilston, Walsall North and South, Walsall Town Centre, Aldridge, Willenhall, Bloxwich, Brownhills, Darlaston, Brierley Hill, Dudley, Sedgeley, Gornal, Halesowen, Stourbridge, Lye, Cradley, Kingswinford, West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Tipton, Great Barr, Smethwick, Oldbury, Old Hill, Langley, Warley, Coundon, Hillfields, Tile Hill, Coventry City Centre, Fletchamstead, Stivichall, Willenhall-Coventry, Stoke, Radford, Foleshill, Bell Green, Wyken
West Yorkshire	Bradford Central, Chapeltown, Dewsbury, Eccleshill, Halifax, Holbeck, Huddersfield, Killingbeck, Millgarth, Odsal, Pontefract, Pudsey, Toller Lane, Wakefield, Weetwood

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which organisations were consulted about proposals to extend the home energy efficiency scheme to include safety equipment; and how many organisations were invited to tender for the new elements of the scheme *(a)* in the Coventry area and *(b)* nationally. [135817]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The following organisations were consulted:

The McCarthy Foundation (which co-ordinates a number of Bobby Van Services—schemes that provide home security up-grades for elderly and other vulnerable people);

Help the Aged (who also operate similar schemes in a number of areas around the country);

Bexley Victim Support;

the Association of Chief Police Officers;

the British Security Industry Association;

the Association of British Insurers;

the Master Locksmiths Association;

the Association of Builders Hardware;

Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate;

Safer Merthyr Tydfil;

the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which is responsible for the New Home Energy Efficiency Scheme;

The Buying Agency; and

Eaga Partnership Ltd. and Eastern Energy Ltd., who were appointed by the DETR as Scheme Managers.

Responsibility for appointing installers to fit the locks and other home security hardware lay with the Scheme Managers. They published an advertisement in the European Journal, in response to which 250 organisations expressed an interest in tendering. Of these, we understand that 206 were formally Invited to Tender, 184 responded and 54 were appointed. For the Coventry area, 19 companies expressed an interest and two were appointed.

In addition, The Buying Agency published, on our behalf, an advertisement in the European Journal concerning the supply of the security hardware, in response to which seven organisations expressed an interest in tendering. All seven were formally invited to tender. None was based in Coventry.

Schengen Agreement

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the role of the Standing Committee on the Evaluation and Implementation of Schengen as concerns UK participation. [134811]

Mrs. Roche: The Standing Committee on the Evaluation and Implementation of Schengen is a working group of the Council which was established to ensure that countries such as the United Kingdom meet the pre-conditions for bringing the Schengen acquis into force. The Standing Committee produces evaluation reports based on the preparations for implementation in those countries, identifies problems and proposes solutions. The Committee also ensures the proper application of the Schengen acquis in existing Schengen countries. The evaluation of the United Kingdom's implementation of the provisions of the Schengen acquis in which we are participating is likely to begin in spring 2001.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the Schengen *(a)* handbooks and *(b)* manuals, stating which (i) remain classified, with grading, and (ii) his Department has not yet reviewed. [134807]

Mrs. Roche: On 23 June 1998 the Schengen Executive Committee decided that the following documents relating to the Convention implementing the Schengen agreement should remain confidential:

Annexes 5, 9 and 10 to the Common Consular Instructions on Visas;

the Common Manual;

the Sirene Manual;

three documents covered by the decision on narcotic drugs (tightening controls at external borders (SCH/Stup (92) 45 latest version), controlled deliveries (SCH/Stup (92) 46 latest version) and measures on combating the illicit exportation of drugs (SCH/Stup (92) 72 latest version)).

The Home Office has received copies of all of these documents.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the UK share of the Schengen operational budget. [134805]

Mrs. Roche: As those parts of the Schengen acquis in which the United Kingdom applied to participate have not yet been implemented in the United Kingdom, our only commitment to the Schengen operational budget is towards SIS operating costs. This amounts to £400,000 for the current financial year.

Schengen Joint Supervisory Authority

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has assigned *(a)* members and *(b)* observers to the Schengen Joint Supervisory Authority. [134684]

Mrs. Roche: In accordance with Article 115 of the Schengen Implementing Convention, the Schengen Joint Supervisory Authority oversees the technical support function of the Schengen Information System. The Data Protection Commissioner has been assigned as the United Kingdom's national supervisory authority representative to the Joint Supervisory Authority. The Commissioner is currently represented at the Joint Supervisory Authority in an observer status and when Schengen is fully operational in the United Kingdom will assign full members to the Authority. Article 115 provides for each member state to have two representatives on the Joint Supervisory Authority.

Parish Polls

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the holding of parish polls; [135145]

(2) what advice his Department has given to returning officers on the holding of parish polls. [135144]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Parish polls are held under the provisions of schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972 and the Community Meetings (Polls) Rules 1987. Returning Officers are responsible for observing and interpreting those rules and my department has not issued any guidance on their application.

Drug Dealers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug dealers have been *(a)* sent to and *(b)* released from prison in each of the last three years. [134536]

Mr. Boateng: It is not possible to identify "drug dealers" on the central prison database as it is not a standard coded item. The available information on receptions into and discharges from prisons in England and Wales for all coded drug offences is given in the table.

Receptions into and discharges from Prison Service establishments in England and Wales for drug offences 1997–99

	Year		
	1997	*1998*	*1999*
1. Receptions			
Drug production	171	145	150
Drug supply	2,210	2,334	2,506
Drug possession with intent	2,535	2,576	2,521
Drug possession	1,139	1,259	1,347
Drug unlawful import/export	958	1,016	1,072
Other drugs offences	61	70	80
Total	7,074	7,400	7,676
2. Discharges			
Drug production	143	159	80
Drug supply	1,585	2,043	1,428
Drug possession with intent	2,076	2,475	1,547
Drug possession	964	1,129	962
Drug unlawful import/export	637	719	700
Other drugs offences	60	75	54
Total	5,465	6,600	4,771

New Year (Licensing Regulations)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he intends to take regarding the availability of late night opening of pubs nationally on new year's eve. [135130]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich (Mr. Henderson) on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 203–04W.

Immigration Policy

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what his policy is on the balance of responsibilities between the EU and the UK Government, and the method of voting in the Council of Ministers, on immigration policy; [135692]

(2) what his policy is on the balance of responsibilities between the EU and the UK Government, and the method of voting in the Council of Ministers, on measures setting out conditions for freedom of travel for nationals of third countries; [135693]

(3) what his policy is on the balance of responsibilities between the EU and the UK Government, and the method of voting in the Council of Ministers, on asylum measures; [135694]

(4) what his policy is on the balance of responsibilities between the EU and the UK Government, and the method of voting in the Council of Ministers, on measures on refugees and displaced persons; [135695]

(5) what his policy is on the balance of responsibilities between the EU and the UK Government, and the method of voting in the Council of Ministers, on rules on visas; [135696]

(6) what his policy is on the balance of responsibilities between the EU and the UK Government, and the method of voting in the Council of Ministers, on rules and arrangements for border checks. [135697]

Mrs. Roche: The United Kingdom has, by way of its Protocols to the Treaty establishing the European Community, reserved the right not to be bound by Community law unless it decides to opt into the adoption of measures falling within Title IV of the Treaty (visas, asylum and immigration). We have indicated our general intention to participate in all measures which do not adversely affect the United Kingdom's ability to maintain our frontier and immigration controls.

On 12 March 1999, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced the basis on which the United Kingdom would participate in the adoption of measures under Title IV. On that basis, the United Kingdom has opted into: the Eurodac Regulation, setting up the exchange of fingerprints of asylum seekers and some illegal entrants; the draft temporary protection Directive; the negotiating mandate for an agreement with Norway and Iceland parallel to the Dublin Convention; the Council Decision establishing the European Refugee Fund; and measures aimed at combating illegal immigration and trafficking. The latter measures include: a draft Council Directive defining the facilitation of unauthorised entry, movement and residence; and a draft Council Directive about harmonisation of financial penalties imposed on carriers transporting into the territory of the member states third-country nationals not having the documents necessary for admission.

Article 67 of the Treaty Establishing the European Community provides that, during a transitional period of five years following the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam, the Council of Ministers shall act unanimously on measures adopted under Title IV.

Firearms

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes involving firearms were recorded in each of the last five years; how many involved use of a firearm; how many resulted in a death; and if he will make a statement. [135810]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Details of firearms (excluding air weapons) used in offences, the number of occasions fired or used as a blunt instrument, and the number of homicides resulting from the use of these firearms, are given in the following table.

Year	*Total number of offences in which firearms were used*	*Number of occasions fired/used as blunt instrument*[1]	*Number of homicides*
1994	6,002	1,040	66
1995	5,866	929	69
1996	6,063	896	49
1997	4,904	1,103	59
1998–99	5,209	1,203	49

[1] Figures of firearms fired or used as a blunt instrument in 1994, 1995 and 1996 are on the basis of returns made in those years. Because the totals of firearm offences for those years were revised upwards due to late returns by one force, figures of firearms fired or used as a blunt instrument are slight underestimates.

The details for air weapons are as follows:

Year	*Total number of offences in which air weapons were used*	*Number of occasions fired/used as blunt instrument*[1]	*Number of homicides*
1994	7,165	6,896	0
1995	7,568	7,272	1
1996	7,813	7,449	0
1997	7,506	7,207	0
1998–99	8,665	8,230	0

[1] Figures of firearms fired or used as a blunt instrument in 1994, 1995 and 1996 are on the basis of returns made in those years. Because the totals of firearm offences for those years were revised upwards due to late returns by one force, figures of firearms fired or used as a blunt instrument are slight underestimates.

Blantyre Prison

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total cost was of the raid by prison officers on Blantyre Prison; and if he will give the cost of damage caused during the raid. [134633]

Mr. Boateng: The total cost of the search operation at Blantyre House on 5 May was £22,784.85, of which £2,242.20 represents the cost of the materials needed to repair damage that occurred during the search.

Armed Police

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the use of armed police officers on foot patrols; whether police authorities have to be consulted before armed police are used on routine patrols; how many forces use armed police officers for routine patrols; what assessment has been made by his Department of the effectiveness of the use of armed patrol officers; what guidance has been issued by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Association of Chief Police Officers; and if he will make a statement. [135807]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The issue and use of firearms is an operational decision for chief officers of police, working within the legal framework and operational guidance issued by the Association of Chief Police Officers. (The guidance has not been published as it could be of assistance to armed criminals.) Firearms operations do not require the agreement of Police Authorities. The Home Office monitors the police use of firearms through annual statistical returns, which are published. The guidance does not permit the use of armed officers on routine foot patrols as opposed to specific operations, and there has therefore been no assessment of effectiveness.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many specially trained firearms police officers there were *(a)* in each force and *(b)* in total (i) at the latest available date and (ii) in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [135811]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The requested information is given in the table.

Authorised firearms officers: England and Wales

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
England and Wales	6,554	6,738	6,355	6,411	6,262
Avon and Somerset	157	165	161	153	150
Bedfordshire	48	46	42	50	46
Cambridgeshire	92	90	80	80	77
Cheshire	84	70	82	70	75
City of London	120	88	81	55	73
Cleveland	65	86	84	78	80
Cumbria	100	108	122	98	98
Derbyshire	130	110	100	87	77
Devon and Cornwall	140	151	147	82	119
Dorset	75	74	72	72	66
Durham	103	138	144	96	101
Dyfed-Powys	57	70	71	67	65
Essex	203	228	217	235	228
Gloucestershire	85	82	84	79	77
Greater Manchester	186	209	182	217	218
Gwent	55	70	59	64	68
Hampshire	104	106	112	110	111
Hertfordshire	43	42	41	43	52
Humberside	104	90	102	205	97

Authorised firearms officers: England and Wales

	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Kent	144	150	150	130	136
Lancashire	138	132	125	132	143
Leicestershire	105	104	94	90	90
Lincolnshire	81	82	85	75	78
Merseyside	119	147	165	121	96
Metropolitan Police	1,915	2,035	1,741	1,951	1,977
Norfolk	99	98	102	109	110
North Wales	70	72	90	97	92
North Yorkshire	134	108	95	83	59
Northamptonshire	95	92	92	92	75
Northumbria	160	173	126	123	114
Nottinghamshire	126	128	129	120	116
South Wales	154	134	176	169	155
South Yorkshire	125	110	108	90	100
Staffordshire	80	78	86	92	81
Suffolk	70	82	96	101	98
Surrey	79	76	61	69	71
Sussex	149	180	146	156	131
Thames Valley	175	185	194	179	187
Warwickshire	50	41	38	44	54
West Mercia	153	155	159	139	129
West Midlands	87	88	95	92	93
West Yorkshire	150	131	114	128	110
Wiltshire	145	134	105	88	89

Cowboy Builders

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what projects his Department is supporting connected with the First Check Point organisation to combat incompetent and dishonest builders. [135138]

Mr. Boateng: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 216–17W.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 1 September on behalf of his constituent Miss Merchant. [135788]

Mrs. Roche: I replied to the right hon. Member on 25 October.

Police Recruitment

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to offer increased remuneration to attract new recruits to those police forces which have been unable to meet their recruitment targets. [134451]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Police Negotiating Board is the body which, under the Police Act 1996, makes recommendations to me on issues relating to the pay and allowances of police officers.

The Metropolitan Police Service has been having particular recruitment difficulties. Following the recommendation of the Police Negotiating Board, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced to the House on 23 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 562, an increase of £3,327 in the London Allowance of all officers in the Metropolitan Police Service and the City of London Police who joined on or after 1 September 1994 and receive no housing allowance.

I understand that the Police Negotiating Board is currently looking at the recruitment and retention situation in other forces and that it is also setting up a working party to examine the remuneration of the federated ranks with the objective of ensuring a cohesive national pay structure which meets the current and future needs of the police service. I will take into consideration any recommendation from the PNB.

Police Officers (Overtime Payments)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans to reform police overtime payments. [134525]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the right hon. member for Maidstone and the Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 217–18W.

Vacant Prison Land, Wandsworth

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans his Department has for bringing into use the vacant prison land opposite Wandsworth Prison in Heathfield Road, Wandsworth, London SW18; and if he will make a statement. [134815]

Mr. Boateng: There is a plot of vacant land in front of Wandsworth prison known as Dobbin's field. The Prison Service is currently discussing with the local planning authority, Wandsworth Borough Council, the possibility of the area becoming a public open space to form an extension to Wandsworth Common, as part of a proposal to develop Prison Service owned land at the rear of the prison for residential development.

Prisoners (Staffordshire Residents)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many South Staffordshire Health District residents are currently serving sentences of imprisonment in the UK; in which prisons they are held; and how many are in each; [134405]

(2) how many residents of Stafford constituency are prisoners in the UK; [134393]

(3) what proportion of prisoners of HM Prison Stafford are residents of Stafford constituency. [134392]

Mr. Boateng: No information is available centrally regarding the principal address of those committed to custody in England and Wales. HMP Stafford however has indicated that at present less than five per cent. of their current population come from the Stafford constituency.

Prisons (Suicide and Self-harm)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what conclusions he has made based on the trends in the incidence of suicide and self-harm in prisons in England in the last five years. [134386]

Mr. Boateng: The number of self-inflicted deaths in prison in England and Wales has risen in the last five years from 64 in 1996 to 91 in 1999 (116 and 91 per 100,000 respectively). The current figure for this year is 72. Total incidents of self-harm have risen from 6,670 in 1995–96 to 7,397 in 1998–99.

The majority of these deaths occurred in local prisons among prisoners who are unsentenced and within the first two months in custody. Other particularly vulnerable groups of prisoners are those who have previously suffered from mental health problems or from drug/alcohol abuse.

The number of self-inflicted deaths among women prisoners and young offenders are relatively low, but are rising this year. Rates of self-harm among women and young offenders are higher than adult male prisoners. Many of those who self-harm experienced similar problems to those who took their own lives.

These trends reinforce the need to give a high priority to measures to combat the incidence of suicide and self-harm. The Prison Service is reviewing its suicide/self-harm prevention strategy and will report to Ministers shortly.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Creative and Cultural Education

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress he has made towards implementing the recommendations of the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education; and if he will make a statement. [134613]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* My Department, in close collaboration with the Department for Education and Employment, has made significant progress in implementing the commitments given in the Government's response to the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education report which was published in January. We published an update of this progress in September, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of the House. It is also available on our website at www.culture.gov.uk. Since then the DfEE have also confirmed that Government funding for music will increase to £60 million a year from 2001–02, and that level of funding will be sustained until at least 2003–04, ensuring that every LEA in the country offers children the chance to learn to play musical instruments.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will report progress on applications for free television licences for people aged 75 years and over and the timetable for issuing licences and refunds. [135912]

Janet Anderson: On the progress of applications, the British Broadcasting Corporation has reported that, by 20 October 2000, TV Licensing had received 3 million applications for free licences. Of these, 220,000 are not yet eligible. All the complete, and accurate, applications made before the 1 October 2000 closing date will result in a licence being issued by early November. People aged 75 or over who are currently beneficiaries of the £5 Accommodation for Residential Care (ARC) licence will receive a free licence when their "scheme" television licence next falls to be renewed.

Of the 2.78 million applications being processed:

2.35 million have been completely processed and accepted as eligible for a free licence.

200,000 people have yet to return requests for additional information regarding their application. Provided the information is returned, the application will be processed and, if eligible, a licence will be issued.

170,000 people have recently returned additional information or made a new application, and the information is still being processed. These will be processed by 1 November 2000.

50,000 people have either been unable to provide a National Insurance number, or the BBC has been unable to verify their information against data provided by the Department of Social Security after a second check. These people have been sent a form to take to their Post Office with proof of their age, after which they will be issued with a free licence, if eligible. Each applicant will be issued a receipt by the Post Office as evidence of their application in the period before they receive a free licence. Where people are unable to prove their age at the Post Office, they will be able to show secondary, alternative evidence to TV Licensing, whose officers will visit the applicant at home if necessary.

11,000 people have been recorded as deceased since making their application.

Applicants who have been asked for further information have been urged to respond quickly, as TV Licensing is unable to proceed further without a reply. Applications which raise problems, such as illegible contact information and current television licences having been cancelled since applying, will be processed as quickly as possible, though this may take until the middle or end of November. The BBC estimates these are about 2 per cent. of the total so far received.

New applications are continuing to be made to the BBC. Accurate and complete applications received between 1 and 31 October 2000 will result in a licence being issued by the

end of November. Similarly, applications received between 1 and 30 November 2000 will result in a licence being issued at the end of December.

On the timetable for issuing licences and refunds, the BBC has said that the mailing of the free licences, and any refunds associated with unused portions of a previous licence, started on 23 October 2000. In order to manage the response to the licence mailing, which inevitably includes people telephoning TV Licensing with queries and changes of address, the licences are being mailed in the following volumes:

100,000 on 23 October 2000.

300,000 a day each working day and Saturday after that, until the main volume has been completed.

Daily dependent on volumes thereafter until mid-November.

As required after mid-November.

The licences are being sent out using Mailsort 2 (the equivalent of 2nd class post) with Royal Mail, and so will arrive with the applicant between two and four days after posting. The majority of licences will, therefore, reach applicants between 25 October and 6 November 2000. The number of licences still to be sent in November could be as high as 430,000 depending on the level, timeliness and accuracy of the responses from applicants. These will be sent out at an even rate through the remainder of the month.

Synchronised Swimming

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the training facilities available for synchronised swimming. [134705]

Kate Hoey: The Amateur Swimming Federation of Great Britain and the Amateur Swimming Association have produced a National Facilities Strategy for Swimming which is in final draft form and should be published by the end of the year. The National Strategy considers the needs of various swimming disciplines and includes identification of the requirements for synchronised swimming.

The £120 million Lottery investment in the English Institute of Sport (part of the United Kingdom Sports Institute) includes over £10 million on swimming and diving projects, to add to previous investment of over £20 million in 50 metre pools at the Manchester Aquatics Centre and the University of Bath.

A number of swimming pools which are being developed as part of the Institute will be suitable for synchronised swimming training at the elite level, but there will also be refurbished or new community facilities suitable for synchronised swimming use by the wider community.

National Lottery Commission

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans his Department has to change the role of the National Lottery Commission. [135401]

Kate Hoey: None.

Athletics Facilities

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many of the seats at the proposed Lee Valley Stadium would be provided on a temporary basis for the World Athletics Championships in 2005. [134845]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* According to the current design concept developed by Drivers Jonas as part of the feasibility study for the Lee Valley Stadium, between 15,000 and 20,000 of the 40,000–45,000 seats available for the World Championships will not be included in the long-term legacy stadium.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has received from the British Olympic Association of the suitability of the proposed Lee Valley Stadium as a venue for track and field athletics and the opening and closing ceremonies of a London Olympic Games; and if he will make a statement. [134841]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* I have received no such assessment. The British Olympic Association are involved in discussions about the possible future uses of the stadium and attend meetings of the Lee Valley Stadium Forum.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if it is his policy that the proposed Lee Valley Stadium should be capable of being upgraded to act as the venue for track and field athletics and the opening and closing ceremonies of a London Olympic Games. [134839]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The main priority for the project partners involved with the development of the new National Athletics Stadium is to provide a world class facility capable of hosting the World Athletics Championships in 2005 which is also capable of ensuring that athletics have a national centre for the future development of the sport. No decisions have been taken which would rule out the possibility of the stadium being used as a venue for a future Olympic Games.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about the meeting of the Lee Valley Stadium Forum on 2 October. [134836]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The Lee Valley Forum meeting on 2 October 2000 discussed a number of matters including the emerging conclusions of the business and technical feasibility studies commissioned by the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and UK Athletics, an update on the plans for staging the 2005 World Championships and a progress report on the provision of accommodation for competitors.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* the Minister for Sport have had with (i) members and (ii) representatives of the International Amateur Athletics Federation about the development of a venue for the 2005 World Athletic Championships since the award of those championships to London; and if he will make a statement. [134838]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* No formal discussions have been held with the International Amateur Athletic Federation to discuss the successful London bid for the 2005 World Championships, since the award of the Championships in April. UK Athletics are required to give the IAAF a progress report on the staging arrangements, including the development of the venue, by the middle of next year.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his assessment is of the impact of the proposed development of a national athletics stadium at Picketts Lock on the long term viability of athletics facilities in *(a)* Gateshead, *(b)* Birmingham, *(c)* Sheffield and *(d)* Edinburgh. [134840]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The new national athletics stadium will provide a new, world class venue for athletics which will enhance the profile of the sport across the United Kingdom. UK Athletics are currently looking at the impact of the new stadium on athletics but have made it clear that any effects on large scale events currently staged outside London should be minimised.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what advice he has received from Sport England regarding the suitability of Picketts Lock as the site of an athletics facility; and if he will make a statement. [134602]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* UK Athletics selected Picketts Lock as the site on which to base their bid for the 2005 World Athletics Championships following extensive discussions with Sport England, UK Sport, the Government Office for London, a number of local authorities and with my Department. Since the success of the bid, the Lee Valley Stadium project team comprising the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and UK Athletics have commissioned consultants to advise on the optimum design for the stadium and on business planning options.

Sports Stands

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if it is his policy that all new sports stands or seating funded from the National Lottery should be covered. [134837]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* No, neither my Department nor Sport England have a specific policy on whether stands funded by the Sports Lottery Fund should be covered.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which representatives from his Department were present at the most recent meeting of the Wembley Task Force. [134833]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The Department sends an observer to meetings of the Wembley Task Force. The official who attended the most recent meeting held on 25 October 2000 was Ian O'Neill of the Sport and Recreation Division.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport by what date he expects Sport England to have received the repayment of £20 million of National Lottery money due as a result of the decision to exclude athletics from the redeveloped Wembley Stadium. [135701]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Football Association and Wembley National Stadium Ltd. have now applied to Sport England to vary the lottery funding agreement for Wembley Stadium, and the final agreement on the terms of the return of the £20 million will be concluded shortly.

Spoliation Advisory Panel

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on progress of the work of the Spoliation Panel. [135386]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I expect the Spoliation Advisory Panel to offer its advice early in November.

Visitor Attractions

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received from members of the visitor attraction industry concerning the impact on their businesses of Lottery-funded competitors. [134490]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* My Department has received a number of representations from members of the visitor attraction industry concerning this issue. The National Lottery Act 1998 requires distributors to submit strategic plans; this helps to ensure that Lottery funding responds to need and that recipients complement existing attractions rather than compete with them.

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the public statements issued by his Department since 1 July on the award of the next licence to operate the National Lottery. [134600]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* My Department issued press releases on 23 August 2000 (on the National Lottery Commission's announcement of its decisions about the new licence); on 5 October 2000 (on the resignation of Dame Helena Shovelton from the National Lottery Commission); and on 12 October 2000 (about the appointment of Lord Burns to the Commission).

In addition, I and colleagues answered a number of parliamentary questions and have given a number of interviews to the media on this subject.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the cost to National Lottery funds of extending the licence of the existing operators for *(a)* two months, *(b)* six months and *(c)* one year. [135699]

Mr. Chris Smith: Decisions on a possible interim licence are a matter for agreement between the National Lottery Commission and the current operator.

Millennium Commission

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what statutory requirements would need to be fulfilled in order to extend the funding life of the Millennium Commission. [134611]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* An Order extending the Millennium Commission's funding life (by setting a later date on which its funding will stop) has to be laid and approved by each House of Parliament before 31 December 2000.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to extend the funding life of the Millennium Commission; and if he will make a statement. [134612]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* I intend to lay an Order and have it approved by each House of Parliament before 31 December 2000. This is consistent with the previous administration's announced intention to extend the Millennium Commission's funding life to enable it to meet its commitments.

Further details of the Order will be published in due course.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the costs of decommissioning the Millennium Dome. [134492]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* Decommissioning costs will depend on the future use of the Dome site and are currently commercially confidential while negotiations are taking place with contractors.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received from the New Millennium Experience Company regarding a prime ministerial visit to the Dome. [134604]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* I have not received any representations from the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) regarding a prime ministerial visit to the Dome.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the Lazards report on the Dome. [134487]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* Lazards have not produced a report. They, and other professional advisers, have contributed to work being carried out by English Partnerships on the review of options for the Millennium Experience site. This is work in progress, which remains commercially sensitive and confidential while discussions with Legacy plc are continuing.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to use the *(a)* building and *(b)* site of the Millennium Dome for sporting activity. [134360]

Janet Anderson: There are no present plans to use *(a)* the building or *(b)* the site of the Millennium Dome for sporting activity.

Special Advisers

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the duties of his Department's special advisers include the drafting of answers to parliamentary questions. [134830]

Mr. Chris Smith: The duties and responsibilities of Special Advisers are set out in Schedule 1 (Part 1) of the Model Contract for Special Advisers, a copy of which is in the Library of the House. Within the terms of their contracts, Special Advisers may draft answers to Parliamentary Questions.

Deaf Viewers (Subtitles)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on subtitling for the deaf on satellite and other digital channels. [134823]

Janet Anderson: We are reviewing the statutory requirements for the provision of subtitling, signing and audio description services on digital terrestrial television. We issued a consultation paper in July, and are considering the responses. As part of the review, we are also considering other aspects of the provision and reception of these services, including on cable and satellite television channels. We expect to announce our conclusions later this year.

Charities

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the effect on the direct income of charities of the National Lottery. [134831]

Kate Hoey: My Department has made no such assessment. However, in 1997 the Institute for Fiscal Studies conducted a statistical analysis of charitable donations, which found no independent effect of the National Lottery on donations to charities.

Steroids

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the extent of the use of steroids in sport in the United Kingdom. [134702]

Kate Hoey: There has been no formal assessment of the extent of the use of steroids in competitive sport in the United Kingdom. The UK Sport Testing Programme focuses on elite competitive sports. While this programme includes tests for anabolic agents (including anabolic steroids), its findings may include UK and non-UK athletes.

The most recent research undertaken into the use of steroids in the UK was published in 1993 and indicated that 35 per cent. of athletes attending weight training gymnasiums were found to be using anabolic steroids. This Government firmly believe that there is no place for drugs in sport and we will continue to work through UK Sport and the national governing bodies of sport to reduce doping in sport through the implementation of an effective testing programme and a comprehensive education programme.

The Government spend over £1 million a year on ensuring the quality of an out of competition drug testing programme in the UK.

Art Exports

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the members of the Committee on the Export of Works of Art and the dates of their appointment. [134367]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Reviewing Committee on the Exports of Works of Art consists of eight permanent members who have expertise in one or more fields of art. The current membership and the dates of their appointments are as follows:

		Dates
Chairman		
Sir John Guinness CB	First appointment	1 December 1995—30 November 1998
	Second appointment	1 December 1998—30 November 2001
Members		
Sir Jack Baer	First appointment	1 June 1992—31 May 1995
	Second appointment	1 June 1995—31 May 1998
	Final appointment	1 June 1998—31 May 2001
Professor Rosemary Cramp	First appointment	1 March 1994—28 February 1997
	Second appointment	1 March 1997—28 February 2000
	Final appointment	1 March 2000—28 February 2003
Dr. Richard Dorment	First appointment	1 August 1996—31 July 1999
	Second appointment	1 August 1999—31 July 2002
Mr. Ian Gow	First appointment	1 December 1994—30 November 1997
	Second appointment	1 December 1997—30 November 2000
	Final appointment	1 December 2000—30 November 2003
Mr. Alastair Laing	First appointment	1 February 1996—31 January 1999
	Second appointment	1 February 1999—31 January 2002
Mr. Martin Levy	First appointment	1 March 1997—29 February 2000
	Second appointment	1 March 2000—28 February 2003
The hon. Georgina Stonor	First appointment	1 February 1993—31 January 1996
	Second appointment	1 February 1996—31 January 1999
	Final appointment	1 February 1999—31 January 2002

Olympic Games

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans the Government have to support a British bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. [134482]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* We are committed to supporting a viable Olympic bid but the decision on whether or not to bid is for the National Olympic Committee—the British Olympic Association (BOA). The BOA have been carrying out extensive studies on the viability of a London bid for 2012 and have promised to submit their conclusions to the Government by the end of the year.

Ministerial Engagements

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the engagements that were accepted by the Minister for the Arts with non-Governmental bodies over the past year; and if he will list in each case *(a)* if he fulfilled the engagement, *(b)* if the engagement was cancelled and by whom and *(c)* if he was represented by another person. [134635]

Mr. Alan Howarth: For legitimate reasons of confidentiality, it is not the practice of Ministers to publish details of their schedule of engagements.

Television Violence

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department about the possible impact of violence on television on the level of violent crime. [134703]

Janet Anderson: None. Under the United Kingdom's arrangements for broadcasting, it is the responsibility of broadcasters and broadcasting regulators to set and enforce standards. In doing so, they must reflect the codes of the Broadcasting Standards Commission, which are informed by its research into public attitudes towards the portrayal of violence in broadcast programmes.

British Sportsmen

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans his Department has to encourage distinguished British sportsmen actively to serve as role models for young people. [134369]

Kate Hoey: The Government Strategy for Sport "A Sporting Future for All" recognises the importance of good leaders and role models to help encourage young people to participate in sport and physical education. The Implementation Group established to focus on Sporting Excellence has been asked to look at the role elite performers might play in such an initiative.

Boxing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the trends in the number of people participating in boxing in the last three years. [134362]

Kate Hoey: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport does not keep detailed records of participation in individual sports. Such information is usually kept by governing bodies.

The Amateur Boxing Association of England has kindly provided the following figures:

	Number
1997–98	6,493
1998–99	7,208
1999–2000	6,991

These figures cover junior and senior registered boxers.

Lacrosse and Hockey

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many *(a)* lacrosse, *(b)* ice hockey and *(c)* field hockey matches he has attended in an official capacity since May 1997. [134361]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not attended any of these events. I have accepted an invitation to attend the Women's Lacrosse World Cup to be held in High Wycombe next July. I have also attended the women's Olympic qualifying field hockey match between Great Britain and New Zealand on 28 March 2000 and the women's match between Great Britain and Argentina at the Sydney Olympics on 18 September 2000.

BBC News

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the BBC's decision to move the BBC One evening news to 10 pm, together with consequent changes to the BBC One schedule, represents a material change under the terms set out in his Department's paper, 'BBC Public Services: Approvals': [135700]

Mr. Chris Smith: No. Under the Charter and Agreement, the BBC is not required to seek my approval before it makes such scheduling changes.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 31 October 2000

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Racism

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Solicitor-General how many prosecutions there have been for incitement to racial hatred in each of the past three years; and what proportion of those prosecutions have led to convictions. [134530]

The Solicitor-General: In 1998 there was one prosecution for offences of incitement to racial hatred under Part III of the Public Order Act 1986—this resulted in a conviction. In 1999 there were five defendants charged—three of these were convicted. There are currently three existing prosecutions involving such offences.

	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*[1]2000*
No consent applications	12	2	5	3
Withdrawn	—	1	—	—
Not granted	2	—	—	—
Prosecuted	10	5	5	3
Convicted	9	3	3	[2]—

[1] To date
[2] Results awaited

HEALTH

Hospital Food

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the quality of food in general hospitals in England and Wales. [134747]

Ms Stuart: Research has shown, and patients have told me, that in some hospitals the quality of food is not up to the standard that patients expect. The NHS Plan sets out a programme of work to improve the standard of hospital food:

A 24-hour National Health Service catering service with a new NHS Menu, designed by leading chefs. It will cover continental breakfast, cold drinks and snacks at mid-morning and in the afternoon, light lunchtime meals and an improved two-course evening dinner. This will be a minimum standard for all hospitals;

A national franchise for NHS catering will be examined to ensure hospital food is provided by organisations with a national reputation for high quality and customer satisfaction;

Half of all hospitals will have new "ward housekeepers" in place by 2004 to ensure that the quality, presentation and quantity of meals meet patient needs; that patients, particularly elderly people, are able to eat meals on offer; and that the service patients receive is genuinely available round the clock;

Dieticians will advise and check on nutritional values in hospital food. Patients' views will be measured as part of the Performance Assessment Framework and there will be unannounced inspections of the quality of hospital food.

Patient environment action teams, comprising NHS professionals and patient representatives, are now visiting all acute hospitals as part of my initiative to improve the environment for patients, this includes looking at food services and seeking views from patients.

Work is progressing on all elements of this programme.

Drug-related Illnesses

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the estimated annual cost is to the NHS of treating people with drug-related illnesses. [134746]

Ms Stuart: In 1999–2000, the drug misuse special allocation to health authorities for the treatment of drug misuse was £59 million. Local authorities received £3 million through the drug and alcohol special grant for the same purpose. However, through the drug action team templates, health and local authorities report actual expenditure in excess of these levels. In 1998–99, the template indicated that £150.7 million was spent on drugs misuse treatment, inclusive of the special allocation and grant.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he next plans to meet the Chairman and members of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to discuss their decision on not prescribing beta interferon; [134751]

(2) what was the cost basis on which NICE made its decision not to allow the prescribing of beta interferon; [134738]

(3) if he will refer back to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence their decision on the non-prescribing of beta interferon. [134740]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence has not yet published its final guidance on beta interferon for the treatment of multiple sclerosis and it would not be appropriate to pre-empt what the final guidance might say.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the savings in social security benefits and local authority care costs that would arise if beta interferon were prescribed to those patients who might benefit. [134739]

Mr. Denham: No. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence is conducting a thorough appraisal on beta interferon for the treatment of multiple sclerosis and has not yet completed its work.

Aricept

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that Aricept and related drugs may be prescribed for Alzheimer's disease. [135063]

Mr. Denham: We have asked the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to conduct an appraisal of Aricept and other related drugs for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. We expect NICE to issue guidance in December 2000.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 16 August on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Sturman. [135791]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* A letter was sent to the right hon. Member on 30 October.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 18 September regarding a constituent (reference POH(4)5608/55). [135456]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* A reply was sent to my hon. Friend on 27 October.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 29 August (reference POH(4)5608/52). [135458]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* A reply was sent to my hon. Friend on 30 October.

Intermediate Care

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how his Department defines intermediate care. [135836]

Mr. Hutton: The term 'intermediate care' describes a range of multi disciplinary, multi agency services designed to promote independence and improve quality of care, particularly for older people. The aims of intermediate care are to:

Prevent avoidable hospital admission

Facilitate timely discharge from hospital, with an emphasis on active rehabilitation

Minimise premature or avoidable dependence on long term institutional care.

Intermediate care encompasses a wide range of service models and can be provided in a range of settings. These services can be provided in community-based settings or in the people's own homes, but may also be provided in step-down facilities within acute hospitals. The most intensive forms of rehabilitation should typically be provided in hospital.

Infant Mortality Rates

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the infant mortality rates were in each of the last 10 years for *(a)* Taunton constituency and *(b)* Somerset health authority. [134314]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Jackie Ballard, dated 31 October 2000:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question asking for the infant mortality rates in each of the last 10 years for Taunton constituency and Somerset Health Authority. I am replying in his absence. (134314)

The figures are shown in the attached table. The rates (particularly those for Taunton constituency, which are calculated from fewer than 20 deaths) may be unreliable due to the small number of events and should be treated cautiously. Any variation they show over time, or difference from national or health authority rates are likely to be due to change.

Infant mortality numbers and rates for Somerset HA and Taunton parliamentary constituency, 1990–99

REGYR[1]	*Number*	*Rate*[2]
Somerset HA		
1990	34	6.1
1991	25	4.4
1992	28	5.0
1993	32	5.8
1994	32	5.9
1995	17	3.2
1996	22	4.2
1997	24	4.5
1998	25	4.7
1999	23	4.6
Taunton constituency		
1990	4	3.4
1991	7	5.7
1992	5	4.3
1993	5	4.3
1994	6	5.3
1995	3	2.8
1996	3	2.7
1997	1	1.0
1998	3	2.8
1999	7	7.1

[1] Registration year
[2] Per 1,000 live births

CABINET OFFICE

Knowledge Network

Mr. Hope: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the report of phase one of the Knowledge Network will be made publicly available. [136034]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Knowledge Network Phase 1 Report will be published on the Cabinet Office website. A copy of the report has been placed in the Library of the House.

Public Services Productivity

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what surveys have been undertaken by the Public Services Productivity Panel. [135461]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have been asked to reply.

To date, 13 reports have been published by the Public Services Productivity Panel. They are available on the Panel's website: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/pspp/

A brief description of the published reports follows:

1. "Meeting the challenge: a joint report by the Public Services Productivity Panel"—brings together the main findings from the Productivity Panel's first 12 studies. High quality performance management is identified as an essential feature of any high-performing organisation. The report outlines a simple, integrated framework that managers can use to engineer a step-change in their organisation's productivity.

2. "Variations in outpatient performance"—sets out a comprehensive strategy for improving waiting times for consultant appointments through a combination of improved management, long-term planning and new booking systems.

3. "Customers in the driving seat?"—reviews the quality of customer services in three of the large transport agencies. It sets out a number of practical recommendations that would be of interest to all public sector organisations that want to improve their front-line services to customers.

4. "Incentives for change"—examines performance incentives for the 150,000 front-line staff who work in the Benefits Agency, HM Customs and Excise, the Employment Service and the Inland Revenue. The report contains a wealth of comparative data on how performance is rewarded and incentivised across both the public and private sectors.

5. "Targeting improved performance"—reviews the performance management systems of the Defence Logistics Organisation against a model developed by the Productivity Panel. This model has since been adopted by the Civil Service Management Board for use throughout the civil service.

6. "Improving police performance"—identifies a new way to measure the efficiency of the police using information that is already collected by the police service. The report outlines a means by which police forces can better understand their relative strengths and weaknesses and thus fits within the framework of the Best Value initiative.

7. "Refocusing performance management"—reports on work with staff in the Energy Group of the DTI to refresh its performance management system by demonstrating how a model developed by the Productivity Panel can be applied in a complex public sector organisation.

8. "Sold on health"—sets out a new national framework for the management of the NHS estate that is designed to root out surplus estate, accelerate sales and cut red tape. The approach can generate additional finance and free up resources to increase the focus on patient care.

9. "Working in partnership"—tackles the issue of achieving joined-up working at a local level, particularly through developing joint IT systems, by highlighting the key issues that organisations need to address as they plan across organisational boundaries. The report includes a simple self-assessment tool which other public services can apply.

10. "Out in the open"—proposes improvements to the commissioning of services for older people. It demonstrates how efficiency gains can be achieved by developing care services that move away from reliance on expensive, and often inappropriate, residential and nursing care.

11. "Putting your house in order"—looks at how to get best value for tenants from the £4 billion invested each year in improvements to social housing stock. It recommends engaging tenants in setting priorities, ensuring structural improvements are linked to social objectives and creating partnerships between tenants, landlords and contractors.

12. "Maximising value for money"—examines the role of the Strategic Outline Case as an important element of planning for information systems and change management initiatives that involve a large number of stakeholders, are novel, risky and complex, or where the objectives and scope may be ill-defined.

13. "Effective reporting in education"—looks at how performance reporting arrangements in schools and further education colleges could be further developed to support the Government's radical agenda for raising standards in education and training. It recommends focusing performance reporting on key targets, reporting on planned improvement in those key areas, and identifying patterns of good practice.

DEFENCE

HMS Olna and HMS Olwen

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the length of time will be between the withdrawal from service with the Royal Fleet Auxiliary of HMS Olna and HMS Olwen, and their replacement by two new vessels. [134931]

Dr. Moonie: The planned length of time between the withdrawal from Royal Fleet Auxiliary service of RFA Olna, on 3 November 2000, and the In-Service date of her replacement of RFA Wave Ruler, in September 2002, will be 23 months. The planned length of time between the withdrawal of RFA Olwen on 19 September 2000 and the In-Service date of her replacement RFA Wave Knight in February 20002, will be 18 months.

Argentina

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on military relations with Argentina. [134959]

Mr. Hoon: The United Kingdom has a successful defence relationship with Argentina. We conduct annual defence contact talks, at which we agree an extensive defence contacts programme. This year's programme consists of over 50 items, including places on each other's training courses; ship and aircraft visits; exchanges of defence personnel and several visits by senior military officers. I visited Buenos Aires in March this year, and the Argentine Defence Minister, Sir Ricardo Lopez-Murphy, visited the UK as a guest of the British Government in July.

Russia

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in what areas there is co-operation between the military forces of the United Kingdom and Russia. [134963]

Mr. Hoon: We look forward to engaging Russia in a meaningful defence relationship. We made good progress towards that objective in 1997 and 1998. But since 1999, the only significant activity that has continued unabated is a programme to re-train Russian servicemen who are about to retire.

Earlier this year, the Russians indicated that they are willing to re-commence a bilateral defence relationship with us. I welcome this and we have taken steps to re-establish the relationship. This must, clearly, be part and parcel of the UK's overall relationship with Russia and must therefore take account of the situation in Chechnya. This is why our approach is one of critical engagement.

On the operational front, Russian forces continue to work effectively with KFOR troops in Kosovo. Bilateral co-operation is resuming in a number of areas. The Naval co-operation programme includes personnel exchanges, ship visits, exercises at sea and the exchange of doctrine and operating practices. Resumption of the programme was supported during the Naval Staff talks held in June and

efforts to re-establish links are progressing, albeit slowly. Nevertheless, HMS Sheffield visited St. Petersburg in July and HMS Newcastle and HMS Cornwall visited Vladivostok in August.

We have also contributed a total of 11 officers from across the Services to attend three-month long United Nations Military Observer courses run by the Russians at the Vystrel Training Academy outside Moscow. Exchange visits between 20 Squadron RAF and the Russian 174 Fighter Regiment in Monchegorsk continue the ongoing affiliation between these two units. Elsewhere, there is Russian participation at various military seminars and courses in the United Kingdom organised as part of the Outreach programme.

Royal Navy Submarines

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the disposal of Royal Navy submarines not powered by nuclear reactors. [134928]

Dr. Moonie: I refer the hon. Member to the answer my right hon. Friend Lord Robertson, the then Secretary of State for Defence, gave on 6 April 1998, *Official Report*, column 57W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) and to the answer I gave on 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 30W, to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock). Canada has acquired the four ex-Royal Navy Upholder class submarines, which are powered by diesel-electric engines. The acquisition takes the form of an eight-year lease with an option of outright purchase.

The first of the submarines was handed over to Canada on 6 October 2000 and the three remaining submarines will follow over the next 18 months.

There are no other Royal Navy submarine exports.

Recruitment Policy

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how recruitment policy for the armed forces will be affected by the incorporation into UK law of the European Convention on Human Rights. [135159]

Mr. Spellar: The incorporation into UK law of the European Convention on Human Rights on 2 October 2000 will not affect recruitment policy into the armed forces.

War Graves

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the war graves located within the Bognor Regis and Littlehampton constituency. [135059]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission who have responsibility for the maintenance in perpetuity of war graves from the two World Wars. However, I will arrange for the Commission to be informed of this request and ask that they respond with the necessary information direct, and a copy will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on proposals by the War Graves Commission to cut overseas allowances. [135047]

Dr. Moonie: The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is an autonomous body subject to Royal Charter and as such has responsibility for formulating its own pay and allowance system, which includes a package of allowances to help cover the additional costs (for UK-recruited staff) of living abroad.

The changes are not the result of any reduction in funding by the UK Government; the Ministry of Defence will continue to contribute to the Commission in proportion to its number of war graves and there are no plans to reduce the current contribution of £23 million. The Government will ensure, in conjunction with the Commission, that the highest standards in tending war graves will be maintained and that our war dead will continue to be afforded the utmost respect.

The Commission has announced that they have decided to hold an independent review of the allowances. There will be full consultation with the staff and their representatives. Any changes will be delayed until the review has been completed. Baroness Dean of Thorton-le-Fylde has agreed to conduct the review; it would be inappropriate to comment further until the review has concluded.

Ionospheric Research

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the environmental effects of ionospheric research; and if he will make a statement. [134230]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* My Department has undertaken no such assessment. However, we are not aware of any evidence that would point to significant environmental damage as a result of ionospheric research projects undertaken for the Department.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's contribution to the Scientific and Technological Options Assessment Panel's investigation into the local, global and public health risks of ionospheric research. [134235]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* My Department has not contributed to any investigation by the Scientific and Technological Options Assessments Panel of the European Parliament into the local, global and public health risks of ionospheric research.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the ionospheric research projects in which his Department is involved, stating in each case *(a)* the number of personnel involved, *(b)* the duration of the project and *(c)* the yearly and total project cost to his Department; and if he will make a statement. [134229]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The table provides the information requested in respect of two ionospheric research projects. I am withholding information on other ionospheric research projects undertaken for the Department under Exemption 1 (Defence, security and international relations) of the Code of Access to Government Information.

Ionospheric research projects funded by MOD

Title	*Number of staff*	*Duration*	*Year*	*Cost £000*
Development of Non-linear Solar Geophysical Prediction Techniques and an online demonstrator system	2.0	April 1998-March 2001	1998–99	120
			1999–2000	120
			'2000–01	120
			Total	360
Specification of Atmospheric and Ionospheric Refractivity using the COSMIC satellite constellation	1.25	October 1999-September 2002	1998–99	80
			1999–2000	160
			2000–01	150
			2001–02	70
			Total	460

' Estimate

Research Programmes

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's contribution to *(a)* the High Frequency Active Auroral Research Programme and *(b)* the European Incoherent Scatter Radar Project, stating in each case the (i) nature, (ii) duration and (iii) purpose of the contribution, including how many staff were attached to the projects and what financial support was given. [134231]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* My Department has not contributed to these projects.

Military Remains

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the recent contacts he has had with representatives of the Survivors Association for HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales. [135140]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* My Department has received a substantial amount of correspondence from the HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse Survivors Association.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will publish his conclusion on the report into whether the sites of HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse should be designated under the provisions of the protection of the Military Remains Act 1986. [135074]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his actions to protect HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales as war graves. [135139]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* A review of policy on wrecked military vessels is being undertaken at present. I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House when the review is complete.

Aircraft Carriers

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the total value of the contracts awarded is for the design of the future generation of aircraft carriers. [133600]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 269W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg).

Armed Forces Pension Scheme

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the changes will be made to the armed forces pension scheme to introduce pensions for life for armed forces attributable widows. [135938]

Mr. Hoon: I am very pleased to announce that the amendments to the Armed Forces Pension Scheme have now been approved with an effective date of 31 October 2000. This means that those in receipt of an attributable armed forces widow(er)'s pension will keep their pension should they remarry or begin to cohabit on or after this date.

British Aerospace

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many former employees of his Department and the armed forces have a position on the board of directors at British Aerospace. [135480]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* There are no former employees of the Ministry of Defence currently on the Board of BAE Systems. However, two individuals who have previously worked in the Ministry of Defence on secondment from BAE, one during the 1980s and the other in the 1990s, are now members of the BAE Systems Board.

Sierra Leone

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the costs have been to date of the UK training teams deployed in Sierra Leone under Operation Basilica. [135922]

Mr. Hoon: There have been three Short Term Training Teams deployed in Sierra Leone working with the Sierra Leone Army. The cost so far has been some £1.9 million. In addition equipment has been provided to the SLA worth a further £1.6 million.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many troops have been deployed under the UN from each country in Sierra Leone; what the timetable plan has

been for their deployment in each case; and what the numbers and timetable are for future deployment for each country's troops. [135923]

Mr. Hoon: The latest figures we have for the number of troops deployed in support of UNAMSIL are as follows:

Country	*Number*
Nigeria	3,201
Kenya	878
Ghana	774
India	3,059
Guinea	777
Jordan	1,825
Zambia	777
Bangladesh	780
Russia	112

The numbers fluctuate on a daily basis as individuals in each contingent move in and out of the country. In addition, there are 260 UN Military Observers deployed in support of UNAMSIL from a variety of countries including the UK.

The deployment timetable for these troops, and any future troops, is an issue for the United Nations.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Incapacity Benefit (Wirral)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people were on Incapacity Benefit in Wirral Metropolitan Authority for each of the past three years. [134737]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Social Security is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Alexis Cleveland. She will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Frank Field, dated 30 October 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people were on Incapacity Benefit in Wirral Metropolitan Authority for each of the past three years.

Information is recorded on the total number of constituents claiming Incapacity Benefit at Birkenhead Office, which covers the Wirral Metropolitan Authority. The number of customers receiving Incapacity Benefit, including Credits only cases, from Birkenhead Office is 21,000 at 31 May 1998, 20,700 at 31 May 1999 and 19,600 at 31 May 2000.

I hope this is helpful.

Benefits (ACT)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what advice he has received from his Department's auditors on the risk of duplicated payment by automated credit transfer re-occurring; [134759]

(2) what changes his Department *(a)* has made and *(b)* is planning to make, to the use of automated credit transfer, following the duplication of payments to claimants of Income Support; [134757]

(3) what measures he is taking to ensure that staff comply fully with procedures for paying benefit by automated credit transfer. [134758]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of benefit payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Frank Field, dated 30 October 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking what advice was received from Departmental Auditors on risk of duplicated payment by Automated Credit Transfer (ACT) re-occurring; what changes the Department (a) has made and (b) is planning to make, to the use of ACT, following the duplication of payments to claimants of Income Support (IS); and what measures have been taken to ensure that staff comply fully with procedures for paying benefit by ACT.

In March, Benefits Agency Internal Audit issued their report on the IS Duplicate Payment Incident. The report contained thirteen recommendations and the assessment of the potential for a re-occurrence of the incidence was included in the Management Summary, which stated:

"The implementation of the recommendations contained within the report will help strengthen controls and reduce the risk of such a problem occurring again. Action is already in hand on many of these. It is recognised, however, that compliance with laid down procedures within the payment production process is also essential in the prevention of future incidents. Where there is non-compliance . . . the risk of errors increases dramatically".

A programme of activity to implement the recommendations has been undertaken. To date, we have introduced a number of system controls that, if a similar incident occurred, would halt further processing, thus preventing duplicate payments.

A system change has been implemented within the 'Common Payments Package', which now prevents the creation of a partial file. The IS incident involved the creation of a partial file.

Electronic Data Systems (EDS) provide the delivery of our IT services, their Code Products team, have implemented improved controls during the 'Autobacs' procedure. 'Autobacs' is a piece of EDS software that formats the ACT files prior to the handover to Bankers Automated Clearing Service (BACS), the ACT clearing service.

The DSS Accounts Payable Central Control Unit has been established. The unit carries out daily monitoring to assure the integrity of benefit payment and accounting data. Following each IS ACT overnight batch process, this team would immediately identify any payments which could not be properly accounted for.

In addition, the following improvements are planned:

A generic requirement has been issued to EDS that DSS benefit system controllers receive positive assurance that ACT payment data, supplied by each separate benefit system has been successfully received before payment processing commences.

The Bank Liaison Sections, who provide the administrative support throughout the calculation and production of ACT payments, are currently based in several regions of the country, working to a specific benefit. The intention is to centralise these sections into one area by March 2001; this will facilitate the identification of best practices resulting in more accurate application of checking procedures.

Alongside of all this activity, a review of all processes and procedures associated with Bank Liaison work has been undertaken. Guidance is being amended to provide a uniform standard for all staff to follow. Mandatory security and accuracy checks have been incorporated to assess performance.

As you will be aware the government intends to move all customers to payment by ACT starting in 2003, this programme requires an extensive review of all ACT procedures, which is currently underway. The lessons learnt from the IS incident will be incorporated into any plans to support the move to ACT.

These actions represent a substantial tightening of procedures to ensure that the original incident could not be repeated.

I am sorry that this is a somewhat technical reply but I hope it is helpful.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what steps are being taken to recover the outstanding sums resulting from the duplicate payments of Income Support by automated credit transfer; [134755]

(2) how much money overpaid by means of duplicate payment of Income Support by automated credit transfer has been written off. [134756]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Frank Field, dated 30 October 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking what steps are being taken to recover the outstanding sums resulting from the duplicate payments of Income Support by automated credit transfer, and how much money overpaid by means of duplicate payment of Income Support by automated credit transfer has been written off.

I believe your question refers to the overpayments which took place on the 17th and 18th January this year which resulted in 112,000 customers being overpaid a total of £10.5million.

Overpayments of this type are classed as overprovisions of benefit and are recoverable under common law and the Secretary of State has a duty to seek recovery of such overpayments where cost effective to do so.

Recovery procedures follow guidance as provided in Government Accounting.

To date, none of the overpayments have been written-off. However, repayment was not requested where the amount paid was less than £5, or from the estates of those who had died before the request could be issued.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will list the causes of the failure of batch runs of payments of income support by automated credit transfer on 12 January 2000; [134760]

(2) how many duplicate payments of income support were made using automated credit transfer; and between which dates they occurred; [134754]

(3) how much money was recently overpaid by duplicate automated credit transfer payments of income support. [134753]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of benefit payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Frank Field, dated 30 October 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking if he will list the causes of the failure of batch runs of payments of Income Support by automated credit transfer on 12 January 2000, how many duplicate payments of Income Support were made using automated credit transfer, between which dates they occurred, and how much money was overpaid by the duplicate automated credit transfer payments of Income Support.

I refer you to the Written Answer given to the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders). Official Report volume 343, columns 471 to 472, in relation to the question of the causes for the duplicate batch payments of Income Support using Automated Credit Transfer.

Immediately after the incident steps were taken to enhance the Income Support Computer System to ensure that similar processing problems did not recur. A full review of the situation has been carried out, and confirms that these enhancements have successfully negated further problems.

The Secretary of State has a duty to seek recovery under common law where an overpayment has arisen outside the provisions of Sections 71 and 74 of the Administration Act 1992. Recovery under common law has been a feature of the social security system since its inception.

Benefits Accounting (BAB) estimate that over 80% of the 10.5 million should be recovered.

I hope this is helpful.

Attendance Allowance

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the average processing time is for attendance allowance for *(a)* first-time claims and *(b)* appeals for claims to be reconsidered. [134551]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Attendance Allowance is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, who will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. David Willets, dated 30 October 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what the average processing time is for Attendance Allowance (AA) for (a) first time claims and (b) appeals for claims to be reconsidered.

For the period April to September 2000 the actual average clearance time for new and repeat claims was 34 days. The clearance time for reconsiderations was 54 days.

New procedures for assessing claims for Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance were introduced last year to improve the accuracy of decisions on entitlement. Customers can now receive clearer explanations of decisions on their benefit entitlement. Initially these changes led to significant increases in the time it took to process each case which, together with a growing caseload, created a temporary backlog of work. This has been tackled as a priority and, as decision-makers have become accustomed to the new procedures, the backlog has now been cleared.

I hope this information is helpful.

Pensioners (Benefit Overpayments)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what guidance he has issued to the Benefits

Agency about its approach to cases in which pensioners on benefits, unbeknown to them and to the Agency, have been over-paid for 12 months or more. [134380]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. John Bercow, dated 30 October 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your Parliamentary Question asking what guidance he has issued to the Benefits Agency about its approach to cases in which pensioners on benefits unbeknown to them and to the Agency have been over-paid for 12 months or more.

The Overpayments Recovery Guide is an internally produced manual available to staff dealing with overpayments of benefit. It provides general advice to staff on how to proceed once an overpayment has been identified, dealing with issues such as the classification of the overpayment, for example, mistake by the customer, official error, and special age and welfare considerations.

It has always been our policy to recover overpayments as quickly and as effectively as possible, without causing undue financial hardship to our customers.

The decision whether an overpayment is recoverable is normally made by a decision-maker. In cases where an overpayment is caused by misrepresentation or failure to disclose a material fact Section 71 of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 allows the recovery of that overpayment. Recovery is sought whenever it is appropriate to do so. The decision automatically provides a right of appeal on the grounds of whether there has been misrepresentation or failure to disclose and the amount determined. This legislation covers the vast majority of the overpayments we try to recover.

However, in some cases we may seek to recover overpayments that fall outside the scope of Section 71. Typically, repayment may be requested where a person has been paid over and above the amount authorised; for example, where someone has been paid twice for the same period.

I hope this is helpful.

Income Support

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners have been awarded Income Support since 1 May; how many pensioners were awarded Income Support in the same period in 1999; and if he will make a statement. [135667]

Mr. Bayley: Between May and September over 137,800 successful claims to the Minimum Income Guarantee have been received. Over 101,900 successful claims were received for the equivalent period in 1999.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners have applied *(a)* successfully and *(b)* unsuccessfully for the Minimum Income Guarantee since the start of the take-up campaign (i) in total and (ii) in each Benefit Agency area. [135653]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table. The table excludes those cases which are currently being processed.

Number of successful and unsuccessful Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) claims received in each Benefits Agency (BA) area

Area	Successful	Unsuccessful	Total
East London and Anglia	2,086	1,937	4,023
Chilterns	1,741	1,558	3,299
London South	2,915	2,820	5,735
West Country	2,400	2,261	4,661
Mercia	2,216	1,988	4,204
West Midlands	1,904	1,565	3,469
Wales	1,538	1,761	3,299
North West Coast	1,740	1,637	3,377
Greater Manchester	1,684	1,468	3,152
Yorkshire	2,174	2,039	4,213
Tyne Tees	1,435	1,374	2,809
West of Scotland	1,485	1,349	2,834
East of Scotland	1,428	1,231	2,659
Total	24,746	22,988	47,734

Note:
Figures exclude Northern Ireland

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners, in each region, are entitled to extra financial assistance through the minimum income guarantee, but are not receiving it; and if he will make a statement. [135749]

Mr. Bayley: We estimate that about 500,000 pensioners are missing out on their entitlement within Great Britain. This information is not available on a regional basis.

Free Television Licence Scheme

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about the funding of the over 75s' free television licence scheme. [136146]

Mr. Rooker: In his pre-budget statement on 9 November 1999, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that, from autumn 2000, every pensioner aged 75 or over will receive their television licence free of charge. The over 75s' free television licence scheme will be introduced from 1 November 2000 and the cost of this concession will be met from public funds, via payments by the Department of Social Security to the BBC.

The Amendment (Cm 4797), dated 3 July 2000, to the Agreement (Cm 3152), dated 25 January 1996, between the predecessor of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation was laid before Parliament and approved by way of an affirmative resolution on 6 July. Under the Amendment the Secretary of State for Social Security undertakes to pay the Corporation (out of moneys provided by Parliament) a sum or sums equivalent to the moneys foregone by the Corporation in issuing free television licences together with an additional sum or sums in respect of the administrative costs arising from the issue of such licences.

Parliamentary approval of this expenditure will be sought in a Supplementary Estimate for the Housing benefit subsidies, council tax benefit subsidies and administration, payments into the National Insurance Fund and Social Fund and other grants vote (Class XII, Vote 2). Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £348 million will be met by repayable advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid from Class XII, Vote 2 when Parliament has approved the Supplementary Estimate.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the proposed advertising campaign on stakeholder pensions will begin; how much he estimates it will cost; and how long it is planned to last. [134531]

Mr. Rooker: The Department is not planning a specific campaign on Stakeholder Pensions. The Department will continue its pensions education marketing activity from January 2001. The campaign aims to communicate basic impartial information about pensions, and to explain the new wider range of pensions options available, so that people can make informed decisions about their pensions arrangements. The first wave of advertising is planned to run from January to March of next year. It will cost in the region of £4.8 million.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the local authorities which he deems to have administered housing benefit incorrectly. [134512]

Angela Eagle: The standard of performance in local authorities which have been inspected by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) has been found to be variable. As at 31 October 2000 the BFI has completed 74 inspections of local authorities and the published reports are available in the Library.

Vaccine Damage

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he proposes to raise the level of payments under the Vaccine Damage Payments Act 1979; and if he will make a statement. [135447]

Mr. Bayley: On 27 June, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security announced that he intended to increase the Vaccine Damage Payment to £100,000. Regulations were laid shortly after and the new rate is now effective for new claims made on or after 22 July this year. We have no plans to raise the level of payment further.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the annual cost would be of extending Winter Fuel Payments to those under the age of 60 now in receipt of the middle or higher rate of Disability Living Allowance care component or higher rate of mobility component. [135839]

Angela Eagle: It is estimated that the extension of Winter Fuel Payments to recipients of Disability Living Allowance higher or middle rate care component or higher rate mobility component would cost around £150 million in the winter of 2000–01.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Portcullis House

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee if he will make filing cabinets available to hon. Members accommodated in Portcullis House. [134325]

Sir Sydney Chapman: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my answer to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 238W.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee if he will make a statement on recent media reports concerning Portcullis House. [135913]

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am pleased to have this opportunity to correct some of the misleading, or inaccurate, comments and articles made by the media about Portcullis House. During the summer, my Committee was encouraged to see in the technical press and elsewhere the positive response to the building from construction professionals and commentators. This was to be expected given the fine quality of the design and the technical achievements in the construction of the building. However, as I have said, a number of unfounded or inaccurate claims have been made or repeated from earlier reports. Hon. Members may find the following facts helpful to know.

The building has been constructed on time and within budget. The construction period agreed by the House of Commons Commission in 1993 was 30 months. Construction started on 5 January 1998 and the certificate of practical completion issued on 18 August 2000, including the additions to the brief. The budget approved by the Commission in 1993 was £165 million plus building cost inflation between then and the start of construction works and £9 million for the delay caused by the late handover of the site from London Underground. Against this total of £237 million the forecast outturn cost is £231 million.

The oft-quoted cost of "£1 million per hon. Member" is simplistic. It totally ignores the fact that at least an equal number of staff will be employed in hon. Members' offices and that two of the floors (one third of the building) provide Select Committee, conference and other communal facilities for the benefit of all 659 hon. Members, particularly those 450 now with offices north of Bridge Street.

There are no plans to spend £0.5 million on buffing up the roof and fenestration. Nor is £200,000 being spent on further planting.

The reception desk in the main entrance did not cost £75,000, nor the preposterous £300,000 as reported more recently. The figure of £75,000 is the cost of a "package", which includes the main reception desk, the security desk at the subway entrance and the security enclosure at the main entrance area.

Hiring trees such as those in the courtyard is a normal commercial arrangement. The cost includes their care and maintenance and requires the nurseryman to replace at no additional cost any that do not thrive. The trees are not purely decorative. The shading will reduce the amount of

cooling needed in the summer, contributing to the energy efficiency of the building. Despite reports to the contrary, the trees are not dying. The trees were distressed having been uprooted and a significant leaf fall was expected, particularly during the first few weeks. There will always be some loss of leaf, but we are advised they will fully recover.

The closure of the building after the basement flooded was a short-lived and precautionary measure lasting some four hours only. Torrential rain on 15 September coincided with a high tide. As a result, storm water backed up flooding a lightwell in an adjacent building, which overflowed through a ventilation duct into the basement, entering an electrical substation. Only four hon. Members had by then moved into the building, none of whom was inconvenienced, and the programme of moves continued on schedule without interruption.

At least three timekeeping devices have been provided in hon. Members' and their staff's rooms—on the annunciators, the telephones and personal computers.

Hon. Members require both storage and work surfaces. The most effective way to meet both requirements is to provide storage under the work surfaces using two or three-drawer pedestals. Filing and storage space is provided also in the joinery walls.

It is not the practice to comment on the implications of any alleged security lapses; suffice it to say that the reported four-inch gap near the main entrance door is due to a capping piece being awaited and, contrary to irresponsible reports, the appropriate authorities did not raise any matters of concern.

Neither feng-shui nor space utilisation experts have been used on the project.

Marble has not been used in the building. The wall and ceilings of the offices are plain concrete.

The easy chairs provided in some hon. Members' offices do not have a "snooze control" facility.

Over 150 hon. Members and their staff have now moved into the building. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. It is inevitable, however, that in a project of this size there will be some teething troubles. To date these have been minor and will be dealt with under the Parliamentary Works Directorate's normal defects and maintenance programme.

Westminster Hall

Mr. Forth: To ask the President of the Council if she will list the hon. and right hon. Members who have initiated debates in Westminster Hall since its inception, stating the number of debates initiated by each Member. [132841]

Mrs. Beckett *[pursuant to her reply, 27 July 2000, c. 811W-13W]:* I regret that the information provided was incorrect. Revised figures from the beginning of the Session to 26 July are as follows. It does not include Government adjournment debates or debates on Select Committee reports.

Ms Diane Abbott—1
Mr. Richard Allan—1
Mr. David Amess—5
Mr. Peter Atkinson—1
Mr. Norman Baker—1
Ms Jackie Ballard—2
Miss Anne Begg—1
Mr. Martin Bell—1
Mr. A. J. Beith—3
Mr. Tony Benn—1
Mr. Bob Blizzard—2
Mr. Crispin Blunt—1
Sir Richard Body—1
Mr. Peter Bottomley—1
Mrs. Virginia Bottomley—1
Mr. Peter Bradley—1
Mr. Graham Brady—2
Mr. Tom Brake—7
Dr. Peter Brand—2
Mr. Colin Breed—2
Ms Helen Brinton—1
Mr. Desmond Browne—1
Mrs. Angela Browning—1
Ms Karen Buck—1
Mr. Paul Burstow—1
Dr. Vincent Cable—4
Mr. Alan Campbell—1
Mrs. Anne Campbell—1
Mr. William Cash—1
Mr. David Chaytor—4
Mr. Christopher Chope—1
Mr. Michael Clapham—1
Mr. Tom Clarke—2
Ms Ann Clwyd—1
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown—3
Mr. Vernon Coaker—1
Mr. Harry Cohen—2
Mr. Iain Coleman—1
Mr. Tony Colman—2
Mr. Jeremy Corbyn—3
Mr. Jim Cousins—1
Mr. Tom Cox—3
Mr. Tam Dalyell—3
Mr. Edward Davey—1
Mrs. Valerie Davey—1
Mr. David Davis—2
Mr. Hilton Dawson—1
Mr. Andrew Dismore—1
Mr. Frank Dobson—1
Mr. David Drew—5
Ms Julia Drown—2
Mr. Alan Duncan—1
Mr. Clive Efford—1
Sir Peter Emery—1
Mr. Jeff Enniss—1
Mr. Nigel Evans—1
Mr. Michael Fabricant—2
Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick—1
Mr. Howard Flight—1
Mr. Paul Flynn—2
Mrs. Maria Fyfe—1
Mr. Barry Gardiner—2
Mr. Andrew George—2

Mr. Neil Gerrard—1
Dr. Ian Gibson—3
Mr. Christopher Gill—3
Mrs. Cheryl Gillan—1
Mrs. Teresa Gorman—1
Mr. Win Griffiths—1
Mr. Patrick Hall—1
Mr. Fabian Hamilton—1
Mr. Phil Hammond—2
Dr. Evan Harris—2
Mr. David Heath—2
Mr. Kelvin Hopkins—2
Mr. Lindsay Hoyle—2
Mr. Simon Hughes—2
Mr. Andrew Hunter—2
Dr. Brian Iddon—2
Mr. Eric Illsley—3
Ms Helen Jackson—1
Ms Jenny Jones—1
Ms Helen Jones—1
Dr. Lynne Jones—1
Ms Sally Keeble—1
Miss Julie Kirkbride—2
Dr. Ashok Kumar—2
Dr. Stephen Ladyman—1
Mrs Jacqui Lait—1
Mr. Edward Leigh—2
Dr. Julian Lewis—2
Mr. Peter Lilley—1
Mr. Richard Livsey—1
Mr. Tony Lloyd—1
Mr. Tim Loughton—1
Mr. Andrew Love—1
Sir Nicholas Lyell—1
Mr. Peter Luff—1
Mr. Calum Macdonald—1
Mr. Robert Maclennan—1
Mr. Denis MacShane—1
Ms Judy Mallaber—1
Mr. Michael Mates—1
Mr. John McDonnell—1
Miss Anne McIntosh—1
Mr. Patrick McLoughlin—1
Mr. Kevin McNamara—1
Mr. Ken Maginnis—1
Ms Gillian Merron—2
Mrs. Ray Michie—1
Mr. Austin Mitchell—1
Ms Laura Moffatt—1
Ms Margaret Moran—1
Ms Julie Morgan—1
Mr. George Mudie—1
Mr. Jim Murphy—1
Mr. Patrick Nicholls—3
Mr. Mark Oaten—3
Mr. Stephen O'Brien—1
Mr. Richard Page—1
Mr. David Prior—3
Mr. Bill Rammell—2
Mr. John Randall—1
Mr. David Rendel—2
Ms Joan Ruddock—1
Ms Joan Ryan—1
Mr. Nick St. Aubyn—1
Mr. Martin Salter—2
Mr. Mohammed Sarwar—2
Mr. Malcolm Savidge—1
Mr. Jonathan Shaw—2
Mrs. Gillian Shephard—2
Mr. Marsha Singh—1
Mr. Llew Smith—1
Rev. Martin Smyth—2
Mrs. Caroline Spelman—1
Mr. Richard Spring—1
Dr. Phyllis Starkey—1
Mr. Anthony Steen—1
Mr. George Stevenson—1
Mr. David Stewart—1
Mr. Ian Stewart—1
Dr. Howard Stoate—1
Mr. Andrew Stunell—1
Mr. Desmond Swayne—1
Mr. David Taylor—1
Mr. Matthew Taylor—1
Mr. Gareth R. Thomas—1
Mr. William Thompson—2
Dr. Jenny Tonge—2
Mr. Michael Trend—1
Dr. George Turner—1
Mr. Stephen Twigg—1
Mr. Derek Twigg—1
Mr. Bill Tynan—1
Mr. Peter Viggers—1
Ms Joan Walley—1
Ms Claire Ward—1
Mr. Charles Wardle—1
Mr. Steve Webb—5
Mr. Bowen Wells—2
Dr. Alan Whitbread—1
Mr. John Wilkinson—1
Mr. David Wilshire—1
Mr. David Winnick—1
Mr. Nicholas Winterton—1
Mr. Phil Woolas—1
Mr. Tony Worthington—2
Mr. Derek Wyatt—2.

PRIME MINISTER

Downing Street Website

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement about the impartiality requirements which apply to the 10 Downing Street website in arranging ministerial discussions about politically controversial subjects with children at school. [135002]

The Prime Minister: The team of civil servants in my office who support and operate the Downing street website work in full accordance with the rules on impartiality as set out in the civil service code.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister what changes he has made over the past year to the frequency of his broadcasts on the Downing street website. [135004]

The Prime Minister: I continue to put out statements on the No. 10 website when there is a particular issue that needs to be addressed. There have been 16 broadcasts since February this year.

Environmental Reporting

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what consultations he has held with the business community in respect of the merits of environmental reporting. [135444]

The Prime Minister: Officials and Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and Department of Trade and Industry regularly meet companies to discuss a range of environmental issues, including environmental reporting. The Government have also undertaken several initiatives in consultation with business to help companies improve their environmental performance and reporting.

In particular the DETR has consulted the top 350 UK businesses and others on detailed guidelines on how to measure and report on greenhouse gas emissions and waste. Similar guidance on water use will follow in December 2000.

To help a wider group of businesses to make a start on reporting, the DETR relaunched the "Making a Corporate Commitment" (MACC 2) campaign in June this year, after consultation with a range of businesses.

The Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment—which reports to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—is currently looking at how to encourage businesses to make sustainability a key part of their decision making. ACBE has consulted with business and plans to publish advice to company board members on this issue. Reporting and communication with stakeholders will be included in this advice as part of the wider sustainability agenda.

Carbon Trust

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will set out each of the planned sources of funding for the new Carbon Trust. [135442]

The Prime Minister: The funding allocations for the Carbon Trust are still being finalised. However, initially it will receive, on an annual basis, £27 million for England from the Energy Efficiency Fund recycled from the climate change levy, up to £6 million for the Devolved Administrations from the same source and at least £17 million from the Energy Efficiency Best Practice Programme.

Kyoto Mechanisms Office

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister which Government Department will be responsible for the Kyoto Mechanisms Office. [135443]

The Prime Minister: The UK Kyoto Mechanisms Office will be an interdepartmental unit under the joint responsibility of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Green Technologies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister what steps he has taken to encourage the development of green technologies as part of Government regeneration strategy. [135441]

The Prime Minister: The Government's strategy for tackling social exclusion and improving the environment in deprived areas is being delivered through a range of programmes that encourage and support sustainable regeneration.

Regional Development Agencies have a statutory duty to promote sustainable development. As well as promoting the development of green technologies generally, they are able to support specific projects through their administration of the Single Regeneration Budget. These may include:

- combined heat and power schemes;
- community based waste minimisation projects;
- energy efficiency measures; and
- innovative solutions and remediation techniques for dealing with contaminated land.

In addition, the criteria used to select projects for support from European Regional Development Funds specifically encourage positive action on environmental sustainability, including clean technology projects.

WALES

Unemployment Benefit

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of graduates were claiming unemployment benefit a year after completing their university courses in each of the past five years in Wales. [134907]

Mr. Hanson: Information is not available in the form requested. The latest available figures on unemployment rates of newly qualified graduates are given. These show the position six months after graduation from higher education institutions in Wales.

First degree full time graduates from higher education institutions in Wales who were assumed to be unemployed six months after graduation[1]

Year of graduation	*Percentage*
1994–95[2]	9.1
1995–96	7.6
1996–97	7.1
1997–98	5.6
1998–99	5.1

[1] Data do not indicate whether graduates were claiming unemployment benefit or not.

[2] 1994–95 data were collected only for students obtaining qualifications in a 10 month period (1 October 1994 to 31 July 1995) whereafter from 1995–96 onwards, data relate to students qualifying in a 12 month period (1 August to 31 July).

Source:
Higher Education Statistics Agency

University Research

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much funding each university in Wales has received towards research in each of the past five years. [134905]

Mr. Hanson: The figures set out include research income from all sources including Research Councils, charities, industry, commerce, Government and public bodies. Since 1 July 1999 this has been the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales.

£000

Institution	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
University of Glamorgan	2,508	2,969	3,003	2,301	1,910
University of Wales, Aberystwyth	12,689	11,618	12,598	11,230	12,922
University College Wales, Bangor	12,092	12,765	13,790	13,100	15,067
Cardiff University	28,916	30,441	32,089	37,865	38,903
University of Wales, Lampeter	1,492	1,042	1,243	1,268	1,097
University of Wales, Swansea	17,371	17,284	16,646	16,303	17,339
University of Wales College of Medicine	14,900	14,898	15,305	15,933	17,536
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	151	318	343	1,022	987
University of Wales College, Newport	233	246	255	278	501
North East Wales Institute	1,533	1,536	1,204	878	844
Swansea Institute of Higher Education	64	2	1	231	170
Trinity College Carmarthen	35	74	130	171	63
Welsh College of Music and Drama	0	0	0	0	0

Secondary Legislation

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what discussions his Department has had with officials from the National Assembly for Wales on the development of common practice across Government when framing legislation which accords secondary legislation powers to the National Assembly for Wales; [134365]

(2) what discussions his Department has had with officials from the National Assembly for Wales on the development of common practice across Government when framing legislation which accords secondary legislative powers to the National Assembly for Wales. [134366]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I recognise the importance of developing common practices in framing the Assembly's secondary legislative powers. Devolution Guidance Note (DGN) 9 on Post Devolution Primary Legislation Affecting Wales is currently being prepared and I expect it to be published by Cabinet Office shortly. Both my officials and those of the National Assembly for Wales have been involved in the discussions on its contents.

The framing of the Assembly's powers in current Bills will continue to be discussed thoroughly on a case-by-case basis by officials, including Assembly officials.

Home Improvement Grants

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the average waiting time between application and completion of work involving mandatory home improvement grants for *(a)* Wales and *(b)* each council in Wales in each of the last two years. [135239]

Mr. Hanson: This information is not held centrally.

Historic Building Grants

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many historic building grants were awarded in the last five years in Wales; and what was the average cost of these grants. [135206]

Mr. Hanson: Between 1 April 1995 and 30 June 1999 Cadw offered grants in respect of 486 properties in Wales. The average offer per property was £22,902.

Since 1 July 1999, this has been a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Rip-off Britain Campaign

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received from the motor industry since the start of his Rip-off Britain Campaign. [134978]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has received a number of representations from the motor industry.

Company Insolvencies

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many company insolvencies there were in the last 10 years. [135229]

Dr. Howells: The total number of company insolvencies in England and Wales for the years 1990 to 1999 was 166,829. The number in each year is shown in the table.

Year	*Number*
1990	15,051
1991	21,827
1992	24,425
1993	20,708
1994	16,728
1995	14,536
1996	13,461
1997	12,610
1998	13,203
1999	14,280

Licence Fees

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list licence fee increases for the top 50 licence payments payable to Ofgem. [135058]

Mrs. Liddell: Licence fees paid by individual licensees are commercially confidential.

Military Equipment Exports

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in 1999 prices, what was the value of military equipment licensed for export to China in each year between 1985 and 1999. [134435]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost. However, in response to a recommendation made by the Quadripartite Committee, the 1999 Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls sets out the total value in respect of which a Standard Individual Export Licence (SIEL) was issued for the export of military equipment and other goods subject to strategic export controls. However, this total is likely to be greater than the value of exports that are actually made under the SIELs concerned because some of these will not be used to make all of the exports authorised and others will not be used at all. In addition, some goods are exported only temporarily and later returned to the UK.

It should also be noted that this figure does not cover all types of licence. Open licences allow the exporters concerned to make multiple shipments of the specified goods to the specified destinations in accordance with the licence conditions. While such licences do not normally impose any limit on the volume of exports that may be made under the licence, exporters are required as a condition of the licence to maintain records of all controlled exports for a minimum of three or four years depending on the goods. While these records may be examined by compliance offices in the course of routine compliance visits, the Export Control Organisation does not compile any central record.

For the years prior to 1999, applicants for Standard Individual Export Licences were required to record on the application form the value of the goods for which a licence was sought; this information was then recorded on ECO's computer databases. However, where a licence was issued, the value of the goods covered by that licence may have been less than the value of the goods covered by the original application. Exporters sometimes mistakenly apply for a licence to export goods for which no licence is required. In addition, goods are sometimes withdrawn from the coverage of an application during the licensing process, for example at the exporter's request, or the value may change during the time taken to process the application because of changes in exchange rates. Moreover, the value of the goods licensed for export by each individual licence was not recorded on ECO's computer database until 1 January 1999, although it was shown on the licence itself.

Finally, HM Customs and Excise collect and record information on imports to and exports from the UK for trade statistics purposes. This information is set out in Part III of the Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls.

"Voices"

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much his Department spent on advertising in the recent Government publication, "Voices". [135586]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The DTI spent £4,388 (excluding VAT) on advertising in the recent Government publication "Voices".

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department since 1999 in reducing sickness absence; what targets he has agreed with the Cabinet Office; and if he will make a statement. [135493]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The Cabinet Office prepares each year an annual report of sickness absence in the Civil Service, which includes information for each department. The report for 1999 is currently being finalised and will be published soon.

Details of the department's targets for reduced sickness absence for the years 2001 and 2003 against a baseline year of 1998 will be included in its Service Delivery Agreement. This is also to be published shortly.

The department has a programme of action to encourage management best practice in maximising attendance.

Petrol Prices

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received on the increased cost of petrol to businesses, rural dwellers and farmers; and if he will make a statement. [135796]

Mr. Byers: I have received a number of such representations and understand concerns about the continued rise in petrol prices. Most of this is caused by the current unsustainably high level of oil prices. Together with other oil consuming countries, the Government are calling for action from OPEC and other oil producers which would contribute to a reduction in oil prices and greater stability in oil markets.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 6 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 252–53W, concerning the percentage of the price of petrol which is accounted for by taxation in each EU country, if he will update those figures. [135774]

Mrs. Liddell: The latest available information for premium unleaded petrol prices and taxes is for July 2000 and is shown in the table.

European unleaded petrol prices[1]

Pence per litre[2]

	Prices as at mid July 2000		
	Pump price	*Amount of tax*	*Tax component percentage*
Austria	61.48	36.27	59.00
Belgium	66.21	43.34	65.46
Denmark	71.01	46.77	65.85
Finland	73.31	48.37	65.98
France	71.61	48.74	68.07

European unleaded petrol prices[1]

Pence per litre[2]

	Prices as at mid July 2000		
	Pump price	*Amount of tax*	*Tax component percentage*
Germany	65.47	44.33	67.70
Greece	51.49	26.41	51.29
Ireland	58.29	33.90	58.16
Italy	70.32	44.40	63.14
Luxembourg	54.18	29.17	53.85
Netherlands	74.38	48.56	65.29
Portugal	55.76	26.27	47.11
Spain	52.81	30.63	58.00
Sweden	71.90	47.62	66.23
UK	84.65	61.43	72.57

[1] Premium unleaded 95RON

[2] Prices converted to pounds sterling using mid July exchange rates

Source

European Commission Oil Bulletin

Fuel Delivery Operators

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to what extent service personnel are being trained to operate fuel delivery lorries in the event of disruption to supply. [135654]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary published on 29 September a Memorandum of Understanding signed by all members of the Fuel Supply Task Force aimed at putting in place robust systems to avoid disruption of fuel supplies.

Military personnel played a contingency role during the disruption in September and they will be in a position to do so again if needed to ensure the distribution of fuel.

Mergers

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what constraints exist, where a breach of merger undertakings is identified, on the ability of the competition authorities to require an immediate rectification of such a breach; and if he will make a statement. [135665]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* Where the parties to a merger are found to be in breach of statutory undertakings and the Director General of Fair Trading advises my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry that the circumstances of the breach are such that the relevant provisions should be enforced, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry may make an order under sections 73 or 75k of the Fair Trading Act 1973 exercising the powers referred to therein, where he considers this will remedy the adverse effects of the merger. An application to the court may also be considered under section 93A of the Act.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action can be taken by the competition authorities for which he is responsible where a company is found to be in breach of undertakings given to obtain approval of a merger under the Fair Trading Act 1973; and if he will make a statement. [135668]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* If the Director General of Fair Trading (DGFT) considers that a breach of undertakings has occurred, he will consider whether to advise my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to release the parties from the undertakings, or to vary or replace them (for example, because a change in market conditions has made it difficult or unreasonable for the parties to continue to seek to comply with the undertakings). The DGFT will also consider whether the circumstances of the breach are such that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry should be advised to make an order under section 73 or 75k of the Fair Trading Act 1973 exercising the powers referred to therein, where he considers this is required to remedy the adverse effects of the merger. Consideration may also be given to civil proceedings in an appropriate case.

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims for compensation for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease have been *(a)* received and *(b)* settled in each of the last five years. [134437]

Mrs. Liddell: The Department has received a total of 122,952 claims for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, of which 5,161 have been settled in full and final settlement. In total the Department has made payments totalling £78 million, including 22,292 interim settlement payments.

These are broken down as follows:

	Received	*Settled full and final*	*Interim*
Pre 1996	870	—	1
1996	5,548	—	4
1997	3,259	—	—
1998	54,145	7	10,519
1999	29,424	799	5,485
2000	29,706	2,509	6,283

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) when the claim of William Farrington (deceased) for compensation for respiratory disease will be dealt with by IRISC Claims Management; [134442]

(2) what action he has taken to deal with the claim of Mr. William Farrington (deceased) for compensation for respiratory disease. [134443]

Mrs. Liddell: On 24 February 2000, in line with the prioritisation procedure agreed with the solicitors representing the claimants, IRISC (the Department's claims handling agents) sent Maddocks Clarke, Mrs. Farrington's solicitor, the necessary Claims Questionnaire, Financial/Other Losses Questionnaire and Mandates which authorise access to the late Mr. Farrington's medical records.

Maddocks Clarke returned the completed forms to IRISC on 22 May. Unfortunately there was conflicting information entered on the Claims Questionnaire and the Financial/Other Losses Questionnaire and IRISC contacted Maddocks Clarke to clarify this. Clarification was received on 23 June and the forms were forwarded to Healthcall, provider of the medical assessments.

Healthcall had anticipated that they would complete the scanning of all the required medical records by the middle of September. However, due to staff sickness and the unavailability of Health Authority staff this was delayed and the remaining records will now be scanned on 21 November.

All the documentation will then be passed to a respiratory consultant who will assess the disability for which the Department is liable. IRISC will write to Mrs. Farrington's solicitor with an offer of compensation within two weeks of receiving the correctly completed medical report form.

Prior to his death Mr. Farrington received an interim payment of £2,000, and subsequently Mrs. Farrington has received her bereavement award.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the average time take by IRISC Claims Management to deal with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease claims in the last 12 months. [134438]

Mrs. Liddell: The processing of COPD claims requires the involvement of many bodies—the Department, its contractors, the Compensation Recovery Unit of the Department of Social Security and the claimants' solicitors. Where IRISC, the Department's claims handling agents, are involved there are time scales at various stages of the process, set out in the Handling Agreement signed by the Department and the solicitors representing the claimants.

Some of the main deadlines include agreeing or contending an Employment History within 56 days of receipt of a completed Claims Questionnaire and making an offer on general damages within 28 days of receipt of a medical assessment process—MAP—report. It should be noted that there are not formal time scales for other parties, including solicitors.

For those claimants who have received a full and final settlement since 1 November 1999 IRISC advise that the targets set out in the Handling Agreement have been met in all cases.

Oil Tankers

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what power the Government have to seize oil tankers owned by *(a)* private contractors and *(b)* oil companies. [135944]

Mrs. Liddell: The Energy Act 1976 contains powers which would enable Government to direct both private contractors and oil companies to act in specified ways. The Act contains no specific powers to requisition vehicles.

It would be possible, however, to take powers to requisition vehicles in emergency regulations made under section 2 of the Emergency Powers Act 1920.

Director General of Telecommunications

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the appointment of the Director General of Telecommunications. [136103]

Ms Hewitt: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has today re-appointed David Edmonds as Director General of Telecommunications for a further three years from 1 April 2001. Since his appointment on 1 April 1998, Mr. Edmonds has been successful in stimulating a more competitive, forward looking telecoms regulatory regime.

The Government are committed to creating the most dynamic and competitive communications market possible, giving consumers more choice, lowering prices and encouraging greater innovation. Mr. Edmonds is the right person to make and carry through the tough decisions necessary to achieve that goal.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

British Council

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future structure and strategy of the British Council. [135592]

Mr. Hain: The British Council has reviewed its operations over the next five years, to ensure that it continues to make maximum impact in a world of rapid change and to exploit new opportunities to reach wider, younger target audiences.

As a result, and with the encouragement of the FCO, the Council will increase its work in countries in transition to full democracy. It will open up in Armenia, and increase resources for Central and Eastern Europe.

In recognition of the important work the Council does overseas, under this year's Spending Review of 2001–02 to 2003–04 the Council will receive an increase in its grant in aid of £24.8 million. In addition to helping to fund the proposed expansion in the Council's overseas network, particularly in Russia and China, it will assist in the development of new knowledge and learning centres, for the benefit mainly of developing countries.

In Western Europe, where infrastructure costs are particularly high, and new forms of Information Technology widely used, the Council will make a significant shift in resources from fixed costs to activities. It will focus its physical presence in capital cities and use some of the savings to fund investment in new, IT-based programmes and services, exploiting the enormous potential of the new media. This will allow the Council to reach wider audiences, particularly young professional people, while maintaining core programmes.

To reflect changed priorities the Council will close country directorates in Belarus, Ecuador, Lesotho and Swaziland (citizens of some of these countries may still be able to participate in British Council programmes in their region). The Council will also close a small number of offices outside capital cities. Where appropriate, it plans to modify library and information services to match changing patterns of local demand.

The reduction in physical presence will allow overall program expenditure to increase. Arts, science, English language teaching and education training will remain core activities. The Council will expand work on governance and human rights; it will aim work in science, the

environment, health and technology at wider, younger audiences. Generally, it will move to larger cross-sectoral activities that will attract wider audiences and have greater media impact.

In summary, the Council's new strategy is designed to ensure that it remains in tune with the evolving needs of target audiences as we move into a new century.

Conflict Diamonds

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact on dealing in illegal diamonds by the RUF in Sierra Leone of his initiatives on conflict diamonds. [135918]

Mr. Hain: As part of HMG's initiative to tackle the problem of conflict diamonds, the UK played the lead role in promoting UN Security Council resolution 1306(2000) which was adopted on 5 July 2000 and imposed a ban on the direct or indirect import of all rough diamonds from Sierra Leone to the territory of UN member states. The resolution provided for an exemption from the ban for diamonds controlled by the Government of Sierra Leone through a Certificate of Origin regime. This exemption came into effect on 6 October when the UN Sanctions Committee Chairman reported to the President of the Security Council that an effective regime was fully in operation.

We anticipate that the new regime will enhance the capacity of the Government and people of Sierra Leone to benefit from their country's diamond wealth, while limiting the rebels' income from the illicit diamond trade.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to Nigeria concerning allegations about senior Nigerians in the UN force dealing in illegal diamonds. [135920]

Mr. Hain: UN Security Council resolution 1306, adopted on 5 July 2000, prohibits the direct or indirect import of all rough diamonds from Sierra Leone to the territory of UN member states, unless accompanied by a Certificate of Origin issued by the Government of Sierra Leone.

It is for the UN Sanctions Committee to investigate any allegations that this prohibition may have been violated.

Zimbabwe

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to President Mugabe of Zimbabwe over *(a)* the revocation of the national reconciliation policy and *(b)* threats to arrest Ian Smith and other former Rhodesian Government members. [135838]

Mr. Hain: Although President Mugabe has announced to supporters that he intends to revoke the National Reconciliation Policy and arrest members of the former Rhodesian Government, he has taken no steps to do so. We are concerned by any action or statement which might threaten stability and political reconciliation in Zimbabwe, and will follow developments closely.

Jordan

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his most recent discussions with King Abdullah of Jordan. [135837]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs met King Abdullah of Jordan in Amman on 12 October and in London on 25 October. The main topic of discussion at each meeting was the continuing crisis in the Middle East and the Peace Process. The Foreign Secretary praised King Abdullah for his constructive efforts to bring peace to the region and reaffirmed Britain's strong commitment to close co-operation and friendship with Jordan.

Departmental Employees

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in what capacity Peter Penfold is employed by his Department. [135919]

Mr. Hain: Mr. Peter Penfold is a member of the FCO's Senior Management Structure. He has now returned to the UK after completing his posting in Sierra Leone, and in accordance with normal procedure is being considered for further appointments.

Sierra Leone

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the UN about the new commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone. [135917]

Mr. Hain: The withdrawal of the Indian contingent in UNAMSIL will leave the Force Commander post open. We have encouraged the UN Secretary-General to consider carefully all suitable candidates for this key position.

Savings Tax

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on proposals by the European Commission relating to tax rates on savings. [135380]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

At the Feira European Council in June, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor persuaded the EU to accept exchange of information rather than a withholding tax on cross-border savings income as the way forward. This illustrated the success of the Government's policy of constructive engagement on EU issues.

SCOTLAND

Scottish Environment Protection Agency

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when the Fourth Annual report and Accounts for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency will be published. [136033]

Dr. Reid: The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has published its fourth Annual Report and Accounts today. The report contains details of the

progress made by SEPA during the period 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000, the Agency's fourth year of operation. A copy of the Annual Report and Accounts has been placed in the Library.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Employment Statistics

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress made in the current review of the most effective way to measure *(a)* employment and *(b)* unemployment statistics. [135445]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Llew Smith, dated 31 October 2000:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question about the progress made in the current review of the most effective way to measure employment and unemployment statistics. I am replying in the his absence. (135445)

There is no general review of employment or unemployment statistics taking place currently. However, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is involved with a project, including public consultation, for the Labour Market Theme Working Group. This includes a question on the public's requirements with regard to sub-national unemployment rates. In addition, ONS is currently reviewing the unemployment rate measures.

The review began in 1999 and the public consultation stage is currently underway. This was launched in September via an article published in Labour Market Trends. The article was also posted on the National Statistics website and sent out to members of the Central and Local Government Information Partnership sub-group. Users are invited to comment on its proposals. The closing date for contributions to this consultation process is 31 October 2000.

A report is planned early in 2001 summarising the responses received and outlining the next steps. Details of the implementation timetable for the various work programmes will also be included.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 12 April on behalf of his constituent Mrs. Eddy. [127374]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 June 2000]:* I replied to the letter from the right hon. Member on 19 July 2000.

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will reply to the letters from the hon. Member for West Derbyshire, dated 6 June and 17 May, regarding Mr. Ian Cannon and Armillatox. [132444]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 25 July 2000]:* My noble Friend the Baroness Hayman replied to the letters from the hon. Member on 23 June 2000, but due to a regrettable failure in recent months by the external courier firm contracted by MAFF to deliver certain mail to Parliament, the replies were not delivered when originally despatched. The Department's contract with the courier firm has been terminated, and a full investigation of the incident is now under way, including a review of our mail tracking system to ensure that this cannot occur again. The replies were re-sent on 29 September. I apologise for the inconvenience caused.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will reply to the letter of 10 May from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton requesting a meeting on behalf of Mrs. A. Barnes. [131751]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 July 2000]:* I replied to the hon. Member on 26 July.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the hon. Member for West Chelmsford will receive a reply to his letter of 14 April on behalf of his constituent Mr. H. E. Biggs. [131755]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 21 July 2000]:* My noble Friend the Baroness Hayman replied to the letter from the hon. Member for West Chelmsford on 31 May 2000, but due to a regrettable failure in recent months by the external courier firm contracted by MAFF to deliver certain mail to Parliament, the replies were not delivered when originally despatched. The Department's contract with the courier firm has been terminated, and a full investigation of the incident is now under way, including a review of our mail tracking system to ensure that this cannot occur again. The reply was re-sent on 19 October. I apologise for the inconvenience caused.

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk of 31 August. [134293]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* I replied to the right hon. Member on 27 October 2000.

Crop Contamination

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he was informed first of the import of GM-contaminated oil and rape seeds into the United Kingdom. [128497]

Mr. Nick Brown: I was sent advice on the position on 19 April.

Abattoirs

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received on *(a)* the future of small abattoirs and *(b)* the level of meat hygiene charges. [132891]

Mr. Nick Brown: I have received a large number of representations on this subject. They will be taken

into account before decisions are reached on the recommendations of the Meat Inspections Charges Task Force.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the future of small abattoirs; and if he will make a statement. [132889]

Mr. Nick Brown: I am well aware of concerns about the future position of small and medium enterprises. That is why the Agriculture Strategy launched in March set up a Task Force to review the issue of meat inspection charges as they bear on this sector. My colleagues and I are now considering the Task Force recommendations.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 22 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 295W, how much of the expenditure of each of the non-departmental public bodies listed in his answer came from his departmental budget in *(a)* each of the last three years and *(b)* the current financial year; and how much is planned in each of the next three years. [131353]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 18 July 2000]:* The information which the hon. Member requested regarding my Department's non-departmental public bodies is as follows:

Allocations for 2001–02 to 2003–04 have not yet been agreed by the Management Board resulting in the requested information for future years not yet being available.

Executive non-departmental public bodies

Agriculture Wages Board and Agriculture Wages Committees

(a) All

(b) All

Apple and Pear Research Council

(a) None

(b) None

British Potato Council

(a) 1997–98: £95,000

1998–99: £95,000

1999–2000: £95,000

(b) 2000–01: £95,000

Food from Britain

(a) 1997–98: £4,918,000

1998–99: £5,282,000

1999–2000: £4,986,000

(b) 2000–01: £5,392,000

Home-Grown Cereals Authority

(a) 1997–98: £142,070

1998–99: £142,070

1999–2000: £147,070

(b) 2000–01: £137,070

Horticultural Development Council

(a) None

(b) None

Horticulture Research International

(a) 1997–98: £12,302,000

1998–99: £12,348,000

1999–2000: £11,407,000

(b) 2000–01: £10,000,000

Meat and Livestock Commission

(a) 1997–98: £289,000

1998–99: £278,000

1999–2000: £291,000

(b) 2000–01: £283,000

Milk Development Council

(a) None

(b) None

Regional Flood Defence Committees

The fees and expenses of the Regional Flood Defence Committees' Chairmen and Members are budgeted for, and paid by, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

(a) 1997–98: £20,951,000

1998–99: £17,551,000

1999–2000: £17,219,000

(b) 2000–01: £15,735,000

Sea Fish Industry Authority

(a) 1997–98: £296,000

1998–99: £271,000

1999–2000: £225,000

(b) 2000–01: £250,000

United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Standards (UKROFS)

(a) All

(b) All

Wine Standards Board of the Vintners' Company

(a) 1997–98: £371,115

1998–99: £371,191

1999–2000: £375,408

(b) 2000–01: £379,000

Public Corporations

Covent Garden Market Authority

(a) None

(b) None

Advisory non-departmental public bodies

Advisory Committee on Pesticides

Agricultural Dwelling House Advisory Committee

Consumers' Committee for Great Britain (expenditure in 1997–98 only)

Farm Animal Welfare Council

Hill Farming Advisory Committee

(a) All

(b) All

Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee

(a) 1997–98: £56,000

1998–99: £71,000

1999–2000: £71,000

(b) 2000–01: £71,000

Veterinary Products Committee

(a) 1997–98: Nil

1998–99: £20,000

1999–2000: £84,000

(b) 2000–01: £56,000

Tribunals

Agricultural Land Tribunals

(a) All

(b) All

[1] Provisional.

Ministerial Duty Roster

Mr. Moss: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the daily ministerial duty roster for his Department during the Summer Adjournment. [133279]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 28 July 2000]:* It is not normal Government practice to publish the daily ministerial duty roster. However, with the exception of two days, I was on duty throughout the summer, dealing with classical swine fever and later, the Government response to the Phillips inquiry and other departmental business. The other Ministers in the Department each took a full share of the summer duty roster.

Capital Modernisation Fund

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will reconcile his answers of 18 May 2000, *Official Report*, columns 269–72W, concerning his Department's applications to the Capital Modernisation Fund, and 5 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 246W, concerning the funding of the European Centre for Organic Fruit and Nursery Stock. [130809]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 17 July 2000]:* Unfortunately, due to an administrative error, information about the Department's applications under round 2 of the Capital Modernisation Fund (including the European Centre for Organic Top Fruit and Nursery Stock) was omitted from my reply of 18 May.

The missing information is as follows:

Application	*Purpose*	*Intended Recipients*[1]	*Financial value £000*	*Outcome*
Round 2				
National Flood and Coastal Defence database	To provide electronic database to store, manipulate and present information on flood and coastal defence risks, assets and associated habitats, supported by and available to all operating authorities in England and Wales	Environment Agency	4,000	Unsuccessful
European Centre for Organic Top Fruit and Nursery Stock	To create a centre of excellence to develop a deeper scientific basis for organics and to disseminate it effectively across organic sector from growers to consumers	Horticulture Research International, East Malling, Kent	2,261	Successful
TSE Research Surveillance project	Capital money for new facilities to enable SEAC Sub-group recommendations on sheep to be met	MAFF	13,900	Successful

[1] Reflects initial allocation of funding

Departmental Farms

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the farms that form his Estate of Farms, indicating for each *(a)* the projects undertaken, *(b)* the operator of the farm, *(c)* the acreage, *(d)* the grade of the land, *(e)* the number of his Department's employees employed on the farm, *(f)* how long it has been in his Department's ownership and *(g)* the dates on which (i) he and (ii) other Ministers from his Department have visited the farms. [132441]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 25 July 2000]:* The information requested has been placed in the Library of the House.

Quangos

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the annual budget of each quango currently sponsored by his Department in each of the last three years, broken down by source of funding. [130806]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 17 July 2000]:* The information requested regarding my Department's non-departmental public bodies is being placed in the Library of the House.

Expenditure

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will provide a breakdown of the annually managed expenditure line in the 2000 Spending Review, listing the items of expenditure previously included in the departmental expenditure limits of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Intervention Board and the Forestry Commission or otherwise managed by his Department. [134012]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The annually managed expenditure provisions agreed in the 2000 Spending Review for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Forestry Commission and the Intervention Board are as follows. Only the Intervention Board has reclassified as annually managed expenditure some items previously included in its departmental expenditure limit. The items are analysed below the main table.

£ million

	2001–02	*2002–03*	*2003–04*
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food			
Main Departmental Programmes			
CAP/Agri-environment schemes	1,520.6	1,452.6	1,451.6
Resource accounting items	61.3	76.3	83.8

£ million

	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04
Forestry Commission			
Main Departmental Programmes			
EU RDR-financed woodland grant payments	3.5	5.5	5.5
Resource accounting items	49.9	51.9	54.5
Intervention Board			
Main Departmental Programmes			
CAP schemes	709.2	694.1	705.0
Resource accounting items	4.4	3.3	3.6

Intervention Board: Items transferred from departmental expenditure limits into annually managed expenditure

£ million

	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04
OTMS-Compensation	285.7	268.5	261.5
Beef Intervention	11.0	7.4	7.5
Beef Export Refunds	2.0	2.1	2.1
Total	298.7	278.0	271.1

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which items of the Intervention Board departmental expenditure limit and annually managed expenditure on the Common Agricultural Policy are determined by the *(a)* European Union and *(b)* Government. [134014]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The Intervention Board's Departmental Expenditure Limit consists of administration expenditure and BSE related programme expenditure. The latter includes compensation under the Over Thirty Months Scheme and all associated incidental/disposal costs. The Intervention Board's Annually Managed Expenditure is non-BSE related programme expenditure. This includes intervention buying, other internal market measures and EU refunds on export trade with non-member countries. All programme-related expenditure derives directly from EU legislation and is largely EU funded. The administration expenditure is Exchequer funded and in large measure is demand-led according to the levels of CAP market support activity.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Intervention Board and Forestry Commission departmental expenditure limits given for the years 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 in the 2000 MAFF Department report have been re-allocated to other years as a result of the shift to resource budgeting. [134015]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The departmental expenditure limits (DEL) quoted in the 2000 Department Report for the years 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 are all in cash terms. There has been no re-allocation of Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and Intervention Board DEL as a result of the shift to resource budgeting. As a result of accruals timing adjustments over the three years the Forestry Commission DEL is less than the respective cash provisions shown in the Departmental Report by 0.6 per cent., 2.2 per cent. and 1.7 per cent.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which expenditure items previously included in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Intervention Board and the Forestry Commission departmental expenditure limits are accounted for as annually managed expenditure. [134011]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* Only the Intervention Board has reclassified as annually managed expenditure certain items previously included in its departmental expenditure limit. These are beef intervention, beef export refunds and remnant payments on schemes that have ended, such as the Calf Processing Aid Scheme, Beef Stocks Transfer Scheme and Aid to the Rendering Industry. As part of the 2000 Spending Review settlement the compensation payments on the Over Thirty Months Scheme will transfer into annually managed expenditure with effect from 1 April 2001.

Intervention Board: Items transferred from departmental expenditure limits into annually managed expenditure

£ million

	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04
OTMS—Compensation	285.7	268.5	261.5
Beef Intervention	11.0	7.4	7.5
Beef Export Refunds	2.0	2.1	2.1
Total	298.7	278.0	271.1

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will provide a detailed reconciliation of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Intervention Board and Forestry Commission departmental expenditure limits set out in the 2000 Budget, the 2000 MAFF Departmental report, the 2000 Spending Review and the 1998 Spending Review. [134008]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The relevant total MAFF, Intervention Board (IB) and Forestry Commission (FC) departmental expenditure limits are as follows:

£ million

	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02
1. 1998 Spending Review	1,344	1,265	1,303
2. Budget 2000	1,415	1,215	1,186
3. 2000 Departmental Report	1,417	1,215	1,186
4. 2000 Spending Review	—	—	1,258

Changes in the 1999–2000 figures between positions 1 and 2 reflect the Supplementary Estimates and the transfer of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) from MAFF to the Food Standards Agency (FSA). Changes in the 1999–2000 figures between positions 1 and 3 reflect the Supplementary Estimates but not the transfer of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) to the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

Changes in the 2000–01 figures between positions 1 and 2 reflect the transfer of the MHS and the Joint Food Standards and Safety Group from MAFF to the FSA; take-up of funding for the support package which I announced on 20 September 1999; the transfer of receipts from the sale of Covent Garden Market into 2001–02;

the take-up of funding for a Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE) surveillance programme; and a redefinition of the BSE envelope.

Changes in the 2001–02 figures between positions 1 and 2 reflect the same changes as for the 2000–01 figures. Changes between positions 3 and 4 reflect Cash to Resource adjustments for Capital Charges; Non-Departmental Public Body/Public Corporation adjustments; a further redefinition of the BSE envelope; the transfer of OTMS funding from DEL to AME; and additional funding secured under the 2000 Spending Reviews.

National Changeover Plan

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what meetings he has held with farmers' representatives to involve them in the National Changeover Plan. [134021]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The Government are working in partnership with business, the wider public sector and the voluntary sector to continue the planning necessary to give the UK a genuine option to take a decision early in the next Parliament to join a successful single currency.

My officials have consulted farmers' representatives about the option of receiving CAP payments in euro. In early August I announced the introduction of an arrangement making available payments in euro to traders for certain types of CAP market support measure.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much his Department has spent on the National Changeover Plan to date broken down into the main items of expenditure. [134022]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* Information on investments in changeover planning by the public sector was set out in the Second Outline National Changeover Plan, published on 9 March 2000.

Pig Industry

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what conditions the European Commission has imposed on his proposed Pig Industry Restructuring Scheme; and what plans he has made for the allocated funding if the conditions are not met. [134024]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The Pig Industry Restructuring Scheme was developed in close consultation with the National Pig Association and the Meat and Livestock Commission. In order to ensure that the scheme kept within state aid rules, we also kept in close contact with the European Commission. There is no reason to believe that the Commission will impose any conditions over and above what is laid down in its guidelines for state aids of this type. As the industry has been fully involved with the scheme's development and is as flexible as state aid rules and financial propriety will allow, I expect British pig producers to make full use of the funding available.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the total cost to date incurred by pig farmers in complying with BSE regulations in force in the United Kingdom. [134016]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* No such assessment has been made; however, I acknowledge that the pig industry, like other livestock and related industries, has faced increased costs as a result of measures to eliminate BSE from the British cattle herd.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what costs his Department will be seeking from the British Pig Industry Support Group following its court case against the Government. [134017]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The Government are seeking to cover their legal costs in this case. The amount claimed does not include the considerable time that officials in policy divisions spent on drawing up witness statements and compiling relevant documentation.

Ragwort

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many notices under section 1 of the Weeds Act 1959 have been served during each of the past three years; and on how many occasions he has exercised default powers under section 3 of the Weeds Act 1959 in respect of common ragwort. [133956]

Mr. Morley: During 1998, staff at MAFF Regional Service Centres, acting on the Minister's behalf, served one notice under section 1 of the Weeds Act 1959; one notice was served in 1999 and one has been served so far this year; default powers were exercised last year in respect of the 1998 notice.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many complaints about common ragwort his Department has received in each of the past three years; and how many landowners have been approached or written to by his Department's officials following such complaints in each of the past three years. [133984]

Mr. Morley: During 1998, MAFF Regional Service Centres received 290 complaints from occupiers of farmed land about injurious weeds; 242 complaints were received in 1999; 249 have been received so far this year. Most of these complaints related to common ragwort.

Figures for the number of occupiers of infested land who were approached or written to following complaints are not held centrally. However, Regional Service Centre staff endeavour to contact all such occupiers, providing their whereabouts are known.

Milk (Schools)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what arrangements he has made for continuing the present level of take-up of milk in schools from January 2001. [134399]

Ms Quin: The Government are currently considering whether to top up the EU subsidy for school milk, which is being reduced from 1 January 2001 and we hope to make an announcement soon. In addition we are co-operating actively in the Commission's review of administration arrangements to see whether this can be made simpler for schools which wish to take part.

Coastal Erosion

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about Government policy on coastal erosion. [133339]

Mr. Morley: The Government remain committed to the aim of reducing risks to people and the developed and natural environment from coastal erosion by encouraging the provision of sustainable defence measures. I announced in July a further increase of £30 million in the plans for Ministry funding of capital flood defence and coast protection works, bringing the total for the next three years to £267 million.

Bees

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make available a grant of £600 per annum to enable beekeepers to take basic beekeeping exams. [134640]

Ms Quin: The Ministry funds a range of measures costing around £1.3 million annually to assist the beekeeping sector to deal with bee health issues. The emphasis is on providing cost-free regional and national training in good husbandry and disease recognition and control for all beekeepers. In each of the last two years, the National Bee Unit has organised over 700 such events working closely with beekeeping associations. We consider this to be the best use of available resources.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many outbreaks of foul brood and European foul brood have been identified in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [134639]

Ms Quin: American and European foul brood are notifiable diseases under the Bee Disease Control Order 1982. All new suspected cases have to be reported, and in England and Wales investigations are carried out by the National Bee Unit. The number of colonies confirmed infected with either of these diseases since 1997 is as follows:

	1998	*1999*	*2000*[1]
American foul brood	229	148	103
European foul brood	879	865	1,039
Total	1,108	1,013	1,142

[1] Figures for 2000 are provisional

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will set up a field trial to eliminate bee colonies with European foul brood; and what steps he is taking to ensure colonies with European foul brood are destroyed. [134636]

Ms Quin: The Ministry is already undertaking a range of measures to combat this notifiable disease. All colonies too heavily infected with European foul brood to respond to treatment are destroyed. Lightly infected colonies are treated with antibiotic by field inspectors employed by the National Bee Unit, part of the Central Science Laboratory. The Unit is conducting well publicised trials for the long-term control of the disease without the need for destruction of the bees in these valuable colonies. Preliminary results are promising.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time bee inspectors are employed by his Department. [134637]

Ms Quin: This year, the National Bee Unit employed *(a)* eight full-time Regional Bee Inspectors and *(b)* 37 Seasonal Bee Inspectors to provide statutory inspection and advisory services for beekeepers in England and Wales.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will reintroduce *(a)* a regular checking of beehives in order to discover and eliminate disease; and for what reasons such checking has been discontinued. [134638]

Ms Quin: Inspection and treatment of bees for the notifiable diseases American foul brood, European foul brood and varroa are mandatory under the provisions of the Bees Act 1980 and the Bee Disease Control Order 1982. The National Bee Unit organises regular annual checks of bee colonies throughout England and Wales for these diseases, particularly in high risk areas. Approximately 26,000–27,000 colonies in 4,500 apiaries are inspected each year. In addition to this service, the National Bee Unit provides training and education to help beekeepers become more self-reliant in the identification of bee diseases through improved bee husbandry.

Single Currency

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on which items of expenditure managed by his Department savings are made when the value of the pound increases in relation to the euro; and what level of savings have been generated in this way since the introduction of the euro. [134025]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* Where the value of the pound increases in relation to the euro, this decreases support to farmers under the CAP, but it is impossible to isolate savings that may have been generated solely by currency fluctuations. Many other influences affect expenditure on agriculture, including world prices and climate.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the Chancellor of the Exchequer has sought his Department's advice on the optimum exchange rate for Britain's membership of the single currency. [134023]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The rate at which sterling would enter the single currency would need to be consistent with economic fundamentals in the UK and compatible with sustainable convergence between the UK and the euro economies. This was the basis for the decision on the conversion rates of currencies which joined in the first wave.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which items of expenditure managed by his Department are directly dependent on the exchange rate between the pound and the euro. [134026]

Mr. Nick Brown: All CAP payments may be affected by currency fluctuations.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assumptions the Government have made on the pound-euro exchange rate in setting budgets for expenditure managed by his Department. [134027]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* Assumptions underpinning Government decisions about expenditure were set out in the Spending Review 2000.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what assessment his Department has made of the impact of joining the single currency on British agriculture; [134019]

(2) what assessment he has made of the net advantages and disadvantages to British farmers of joining the single currency at the present time; [134018]

(3) what priority the Government places on the needs of agriculture in deciding whether and when to join the single currency. [134020]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 23 October 2000]:* The determining factor underpinning any Government decision on membership of the single currency is whether the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous on the basis of the Government's five economic tests. The Government have said that they will produce another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the five beneficiaries who have received the largest sums in lottery grants. [134480]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* According to the National Lottery Awards Database the five National Lottery projects which have been awarded the largest sums in Lottery grants are:

the New Millennium Experience Company;

the English National Stadium, Wembley;

the Eastlands Sport City (incorporating the Commonwealth Games Stadium and the United Kingdom Sports Institute North West Network Centre);

the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden; and

the Lowry Centre.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what the original deadline was for a decision on the preferred bidder to operate the new National Lottery licence; and when he expects a final decision to be made; [134606]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure impartiality in the award of the new licence to operate the National Lottery; [134601]

(3) if he will make a statement on the award of the new licence to operate the National Lottery. [134599]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* I appointed Lord Burns to the National Lottery Commission on 12 October 2000 and I gave him a clear remit, with the other Commissioners, to conduct the selection process for the next National Lottery licence with absolute fairness and impartiality between the applicants.

The Commission announced on 25 October 2000 that it is about to begin evaluating both revised bids. It expects to say by mid-November whether the bids meet the statutory criteria of ensuring the Lottery is operated with all due propriety and protecting the interests of players. If the Commission concludes that only one bid meets these criteria, the announcement of the preferred bidder could be made around mid-November.

If the Commission concludes that both bids meet these criteria, then it will consider which bid would secure the greatest returns to good causes. It will do this without preconceptions and without regard to the conclusions it reached on this matter prior to its announcement on 23 August 2000. It would hope to make an announcement of the outcome by mid-December.

The Commission had originally hoped to announce its preferred bidder by the end of June, but subsequently asked the applicants for more information and postponed its announcement until August. On 23 August 2000, the Commission announced that neither of the two bidders met the statutory criteria for the award of the licence.

Free TV Licences

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures he has taken to inform people aged 75 years or over of their eligibility for a free television licence; and if he will make a statement on the handling of queries. [136028]

Janet Anderson: TV Licensing, on behalf of the BBC, has undertaken a number of activities to inform people aged 75 or over of their eligibility for a free television licence and what they needed to do to apply. Publicity has also been aimed at people who have already applied for their free licence, but who needed some reminders and reassurances about when their licence is due to arrive. The activities include:

Specific direct mailings to all households and changes to existing stationery to include application forms for a short term licence or Over 75 television licence.

Two BBC television trails targeted specifically at people aged 75 or over have been running on BBC One and BBC Two since May and will continue to run until mid-November.

BBC Local Radio trails targeted specifically at people aged 75 or over. These trails ran between June and July and from September to the end of October.

Press advertisements in both national and targeted press in September and October with further press advertisements planned for targeted press during November.

Information leaflets and signs have been provided to all Post Offices.

Information has been provided on a dedicated Ceefax page which will continue to run until mid-November.

- Liaison with key caring agencies and provision of leaflets highlighting concession details.

In addition, the BBC has prepared material for responses to media inquiries around 1 November, answering likely questions, and the media will be fully briefed around that date.

On the handling of inquiries, the BBC has anticipated that applicants are likely to contact TV Licensing with queries about the licences they have been sent, such as the method of calculating the refund, or the validity of the licence for other members of their household. The BBC has tried, as far as possible, to answer these questions in the letter accompanying the licence, but experience shows that many people will still contact TV Licensing with queries. In addition, the BBC says it will be hard to predict the volume of calls from people whose circumstances or their address have changed, and the new applications which might be prompted by the issue of the licence. The BBC, therefore, has in place:

Automated messages on the helplines to answer the most common queries, and to reassure people still waiting for their licence

Call centre capacity to a maximum of 260 operators answering queries

The ability to take people's telephone numbers and call them back outside peak call times.

The BBC believes this capacity provides TV Licensing with the ability to answer up to 500,000 inquiries through the next six weeks.

Responses to the licence mailing are, however, hard to predict, and publicity or press activity could cause peaks of telephone calls that exceed the capacity of the call centres at any given time. The cost of this extra capacity would be £250,000 a week. The BBC has chosen to balance cost versus demand and believes it has set it at a sensible level. The BBC will, however, be reviewing this daily and will reconsider its funding on a day-to-day basis.

Millennium Dome

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting was advised by the New Millennium Experience Company that the information given in her written answer of 4 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 149W, on the proportion of sponsorship payment due to the New Millennium Experience Company in respect of the Millennium Dome, was factually correct. [136147]

Janet Anderson: Yes. However, I have now been advised by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) that the information that they gave me was not correct. The answer should have been:

All sponsor contracts are individually tailored for each sponsorship, including phasing of sponsorship payments. As at 1 March, under the terms of their sponsorship agreement, Tesco were due to pay £1.75 million plus VAT. Of that, £1 million (plus VAT) had been received on 12 May 2000, leaving a balance of £750,000. The contract with Boots was nearing finalisation and the company had paid amounts in advance of signature. The Boots contract has now been signed and all due payments have been made.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) for the unfortunate but unintentional error. I understand that David James, Executive Chairman of NMEC, is initiating a full investigation as to how this error occurred.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Road Building

13. **Mr. Collins:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he last met the Royal Automobile Club to discuss road building. [133313]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Ministers regularly meet the RAC Foundation both bilaterally and in the context of the Motorists' Forum. At those meetings various issues are discussed including road building.

Open Spaces

14. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the protection of open spaces in towns and cities. [133314]

Mr. Raynsford: Our planning policies for sport, recreation and open spaces are currently being revised and will provide a strategic framework for assessing the open space needs of local communities and how best to protect them.

Success of our urban regeneration policy is dependent on creating a high quality environment and the maintenance of good open spaces is essential to this.

South Coast Corridor Study

15. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's south coast corridor multi-modal study. [133315]

Mr. Hill: Today I have announced the Steering Group membership and Terms of Reference for this important study, which will investigate congestion, safety and environmental problems on the south coast between Southampton and Thanet, and propose measures aimed at improving access to and between the regeneration areas and other areas of economic activity along the south coast. The study is expected to be completed in the spring of 2002.

Regional Development

16. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he next intends to visit the north-west of England to discuss regional development policy initiatives. [133316]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have no plans to visit the north-west of England to discuss regional development policy issues in the near future.

Air Traffic Control

17. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the recent breakdowns of the air traffic control system. [133317]

Mr. Mullin: The Government greatly regret the inconvenience and costs caused to passengers and airlines by the recent failures of the Flight Data Processing System at West Drayton, most notably on 17 June. NATS has taken measures to enhance the robustness of this system which has proved extremely reliable over the years.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which discussions have taken place since 1 August on the future of air traffic control between his Department and *(a)* IPMS and *(b)* BALPA. [133491]

Mr. Mullin: We have had a series of discussions at both Ministerial and official level with the Institute of Professional and Managerial Staffs and the Public and Commercial Services Union. Most recently, officials from my Department have held discussions with representatives of both those unions on 4 October 2000 about the proposed public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services.

We have received no recent representations from the British Association of Airline Pilots.

Global Warming

18. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the possible contribution of tree plantations in upland areas in tackling global warming. [133318]

Mr. Meacher: UK woodlands remove about 2.8 million tonnes of carbon annually from the atmosphere—about 1.7 per cent. of UK and 0.04 per cent. of global CO_2 emissions. They will continue to contribute in future, by providing renewable energy and construction materials as well as simple removal. Over half our woodlands are in upland areas.

Neighbourhood Wardens

19. **Mr. Hilary Benn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the neighbourhood warden initiative. [133319]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government announced the first round of 50 successful bids for the neighbourhood wardens grant on 18 September. A decision on a further 42 schemes has been deferred to allow further development. The successful schemes are of a good regional spread, tackling issues on improving the environment, quality of life and community safety.

Regional Government

20. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the timetable for the introduction of regional Government. [133320]

Ms Beverley Hughes: No timetable has yet been drawn up for moving to directly-elected regional government. We remain committed to do so, where there is support demonstrated in referendums. In the meantime, regionalism is evolving through the work of the regional chambers, regional development agencies, Government offices and others.

Single Rail Franchise (Wales)

21. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has undertaken with the relevant secretaries of the National Assembly regarding the establishment of a single rail franchise for Wales; and if he will make a statement. [133321]

Mr. Hill: The Instructions and Guidance given to the Franchising Director by the Deputy Prime Minister in September 1999 asked him to consider the size, duration, and make-up of franchises in seeking best value for money. The Franchising Director announced a dedicated rail network for Wales and the border counties of England on 8 August. The scope of this network has now been defined following discussion, which started in March, with the National Assembly for Wales and other key stakeholders.

Tigers

22. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals Her Majesty's Government are supporting to save the tiger from extinction. [133322]

Mr. Meacher: The UK strongly supports the recommendations on tigers agreed at the Conference of CITES Parties last April. We have contributed over £150,000 to a number of tiger initiatives over the last three years, including most recently £40,000 to help CITES establish a Tiger Enforcement Task Force to combat illicit trade in tigers worldwide.

Mobile Phone Masts

23. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received from organisations concerning mobile phone masts. [133323]

25. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from *(a)* local authorities and *(b)* others on mobile phone masts. [133326]

Ms Beverley Hughes: As at 30 October, we had received 191 responses to the consultation document on planning for mobile phone masts and other telecommunications development, issued on 31 July. 111 were from local authorities and 80 from others. The consultation period ends today.

Transport Infrastructure

24. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on updating the transport infrastructure. [133325]

Mr. Hill: Last July we published The 10-year plan for transport. This is a £180 billion investment plan to transform our transport system over the next 10 years, remedying decades of under-investment and stop-start funding. The plan will deliver a modern, integrated transport system fit for the 21st Century.

Road Improvements (Gloucestershire)

26. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to improve the A417/A419 at Nettleton Bottom in Gloucestershire. [133327]

Mr. Hill: The Highways Agency is currently carrying out a safety improvement scheme at Nettleton Bottom on the A417 trunk road. Work started in September and is due to be completed by early November. The scheme aims to reduce accidents due to vehicles turning right into the Golden Heart public house. A permanent 40 mph speed limit will also be introduced through the village.

Light Rail

27. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what role he envisages for light rail in integrated public transport. [133328]

Mr. Hill: Light rail and similar rapid transit systems can play a significant part in improving the attractiveness and quality of public transport in major conurbations. Our ten-year plan provides a substantial increase in funding for light rail, to back schemes that offer good value for money as part of integrated transport strategies.

Local Authority Houses

28. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local authority houses there were *(a)* immediately prior to the coming into force of the right to buy legislation in 1981, *(b)* on 1 April 1987, *(c)* on 1 April 1992, *(d)* on 1 April 1997 and *(e)* on 1 April 2000. [133329]

Mr. Mullin: The right to buy came into effect on 3 October 1980. The number of properties reported by local authorities as in their ownership and available for rent on the dates specified is as follows.

	Number of properties
1 April 1980	4,763,500
1 April 1987	4,412,600
1 April 1992	3,844,400
1 April 1997	3,400,600
1 April 2000	3,012,000

The change between 1 April 1980 and 1 April 2000 is not accounted for solely by the right to buy, but also by other changes such as voluntary sales and transfers to other social landlords.

Local Deprivation Index

29. **Siobhain McDonagh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to improve the accuracy of the local deprivation index. [133330]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The new Indices of Deprivation 2000 were published by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in August. The indices, based on 33 ward level indicators of deprivation, were developed after careful research, data testing and extensive consultation with users. They provide local authorities and others with information on deprivation within their area as well as providing national Government and regional bodies with a picture of deprivation across the whole of England. I am confident that they represent the best that is possible at the current time. The indices will be kept under review and will be revised when significantly better information on deprivation for small areas becomes available.

VAT Harmonisation

30. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions his Department has had with the Treasury about the revenue implications of harmonising VAT on repairs, restoration, conservation and new-build at between 5 and 8 per cent. [133331]

Mr. Mullin: Lord Rogers' Urban Taskforce recommended that we should harmonise VAT on new-build and repair and maintenance. The forthcoming Urban White Paper will outline the Government's response to Lord Rogers' recommendations, but final decisions on taxation will be for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

London Underground

31. **Mr. Randall:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he last met representatives of London Underground Ltd. to discuss transport investment in London. [133332]

Mr. Hill: I meet regularly with London Underground's senior management.

Areas of Deprivation

32. **Liz Blackman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on tackling areas of deprivation. [133333]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government are committed to tackling deprivation through the Spending Review

2000's specific targets. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit will drive forward cross-departmentally the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan due in the autumn. The new Neighbourhood Renewal Fund's £800 million will provide extra resources for the 88 most deprived authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships will ensure local people play a part.

Safer Communities

33. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Safer Communities Supported Housing Fund providing new housing for vulnerable people. [133334]

Mr. Mullin: This fund of £137 million will finance an expansion of housing and support for young people at risk, people fleeing domestic violence, people with a history of substance misuse and ex-offenders. It is part of the Government's wider action to tackle social exclusion and build safer communities.

Affordable Housing (South Essex)

34. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what support and assistance he plans to give to key workers seeking affordable accommodation in south Essex. [133335]

Mr. Raynsford: In April this year, in our Housing Green Paper, we sought comments on our proposals for a starter home initiative, which will help key workers in high price, high demand areas to buy their own homes, while helping their employers address their recruitment needs. We announced in July that £250 million would be available over the next three years to fund this initiative and we will be announcing further details about it later this year. In the meantime, the increased investment through local authorities and the Housing Corporation, together with our planning policies for housing, will also help to increase the supply of affordable housing where it is most needed.

Climate Change Report

35. **Mr. Brake:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's 22nd report, Energy—The Changing Climate. [133336]

Mr. Meacher: We welcome the Royal Commission's contribution to the discussion on climate change. Together with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe and other colleagues, I will be giving careful consideration to the recommendations contained in the report. We aim to respond to the report within a year of its publication.

Mobile Homes

36. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made in improving the rights of the occupants of mobile homes. [133337]

Mr. Mullin: We have consulted on, and are considering, the recommendations of the Park Homes working party. We have already published good practice guidance for local authorities on dealing with harassment and site licensing, and we intend to commission research into the economics of the park homes industry.

Road Safety

37. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received regarding spending on safety improvements on A roads. [133338]

Mr. Hill: My Department receives representations from time to time, including those from the hon. Member in respect of the A14.

The Secretary of State is the highway authority for the trunk road network and will be spending £47 million a year on safety schemes. These will include schemes on both motorways and all-purpose A roads.

The Highways Agency safety strategy, published in March 2000, is to target expenditure to give best value for money with a maximum reduction in accidents, having due regard for our customers. To achieve this objective, the Agency have identified target user groups and is working with other Government Departments, the police, local highway authorities and others with regard to their concerns in helping to inform the programme.

The prioritisation of expenditure is ultimately for local authorities to decide in light of priorities within their local transport plan. The recent Spending Review 2000 provided £4.5 billion over the next three years for local transport capital expenditure—a 90 per cent. increase on the previous CSR period.

South Central (Refranchising Process)

38. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the south central refranchising process will be completed. [133340]

Mr. Hill: The Franchising Director announced on 24 October that the shadow Strategic Rail Authority had signed heads of terms with GoVia as the preferred counterparty for the new replacement South Central franchise. GoVia are expected to run the business for 20 years and over that period they are expected to implement an investment programme valued at up to £1.5 billion.

North West Development Agency

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answers of 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 757–67W, when the valuation of North West Development Agency freehold and leasehold assets was last undertaken. [133966]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The valuation of North West Development Agency freehold and leasehold assets was last undertaken on 31 March 2000.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions

if he will place in the Library the register of interests as it applies to each development agency in the United Kingdom. [133961]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The English Regional Development Agencies' (RDAs) registers of members interests are the responsibility of the RDAs themselves and are available to the public on request. As such, the Secretary of State is not in a position to place them in the Library of the House.

The Devolved Administrations are responsible for development agencies outside England (e.g. Scottish Enterprise, Welsh Development Agency).

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the names of the *(a)* ad hoc and *(b)* permanent subcommittees and subgroups of the North West Development Agency which deal with regional issues; and what is the remit of each such committee. [133964]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Board of the North West Development Agency (NWDA) has established a number of sub committees and sub groups as follows:

Audit Committee

An Audit Committee is the only formal committee of the Board and was officially established in February 2000. The Audit Committee is authorised by the Board to investigate any activity within its duties and may obtain outside legal or other independent professional advice. Its remit is as follows:

Discuss with the auditor the nature and scope of each forthcoming audit to ensure that the auditor has the fullest co-operation of staff.

Review the annual statement before submission to the Board.

Discuss problems and reservations arising from the audit and any matters that the auditor may wish to discuss.

Review the NWDA's statement of internal control systems prior to endorsement to the Board.

Make recommendations to the Board of the NWDA.

The Health Partnership

The Health Partnership, which is a sub group to the Board of the North West Development Agency was formed in July 1999. Its main purpose is to assist the North West Development Agency in carrying out its role in contributing to health objectives through its work on economic and social regeneration. The Health Partnership provides a forum in which key organisations can contribute to the pool of knowledge on health related issues so that health is fully integrated into the policies of the Agency and regarded as a cross-cutting issue in all policy and programme development.

The Rural Sub Group

The Rural Sub Group to the Board of the North West Development Agency was established in November 1999 and has the following purposes:

To provide advice and information to the Board on rural issues and to take full account of the rural dimension within the North West Development Agency's policies, strategies, action plans and programmes.

To ensure as far as possible that the needs of the rural population of the North West are part of the social inclusion agenda.

To ensure as far as possible that the rural economy is integrated into the mainstream provision of business support services and that the contribution it makes to the regional economy is fully recognised.

To ensure that rural communities receive a fair share of resources both from the North West Development Agency and from other regional funds.

To monitor and evaluate the North West Development Agency's rural policies, action plans and programmes.

To encourage partnerships to address rural issues and the problems of rural areas.

The Social and Economic Inclusion Sub Group

The Social and Economic Inclusion Sub Group was established in August 1999 and has the following purposes:

To provide advice and information to the Board of the North West Development Agency on Social Inclusion.

To strengthen the capacity of the North West Development Agency and its partners across the region to deliver social inclusion and economic development and to increase access and influence by those groups hitherto excluded from decision making.

To monitor and evaluate the Agency's performance on social and economic inclusion and where appropriate offer advice on strategy and delivery.

The Urban Sub Group

The Urban Sub Group was established in March 2000 and provides advice and information to the Board on urban issues and, in particular, to advise the Board on:

Matters arising from the publication of the forthcoming Urban White Paper.

Matters arising from the publication of the forthcoming Housing Green Paper.

The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) Sub Group

The SRB Sub Group is a permanent advisory group to the Board which meets only at the beginning of the SRB bidding round to agree the criteria for bids and then at the submission stage to consider the bids and make recommendations on those bids to the Board of the North West Development Agency. The need for the sub group is reviewed annually.

North West Innovation and Technology Advisory Board (NWITAB)

NWITAB is a formal advisory board which was commissioned by the North West Development Agency to:

Provide strategic advice and guidance to the NWDA Board on Innovation and Technology issues

Develop and implement the North West Innovation Strategy. (NWIS)

The role of the Board is as follows:

To advise the NWDA Board, via the NWITAB Chair, on all matters relating to the development and implementation of the NWIS.

To develop and maintain a regional consensus view on the NWIS and its implementation.

To endorse NWIS business plans, monitor progress and guide the NWIS Executive accordingly.

To explore the longer term changes in the Region, nationally and globally, and advise on opportunities, threats and appropriate changes to NWIS and the implementation plan (NW Foresight Group).

To co-ordinate all innovation and technology activities in the North West region.

The Board consists of a wide range of representatives from the Private Sector, and representatives from the Universities Association and Government Office for the North West.

The North West Innovation Strategy was launched on 8 September 2000.

Minutes from each sub committee and sub group meeting are submitted to the NWDA Board regularly for their approval and, when appropriate, for items of ratification. The NWDA Board regularly review the appropriateness of each of the Sub Groups as well as the administrative arrangements.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answers of 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 757–67W, what is the name of the tenant at Lakeland Business Park, Cockermouth, whose letting commenced on 20 March. [133971]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The name of the tenant at Lakeland Business Park, Cockermouth whose letting commenced on 20 March is North Cumbria Health Authority.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answers of 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 757–67W, to whom the North West Development Agency is accountable on the provision of information on decisions, and estimates of efficiency gains and financial benefits that arose out of moving the location of its offices. [133962]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The North West Development Agency is accountable to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and must provide such information as the Secretary of State may require.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answers of 27 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 757–67W, if he will list those interests in relation to which members of the board of the North West Development Agency stood aside from consideration of agency business in the 12 month period used in answer. [133960]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Board Members of the North West Development Agency declared an interest and stood aside (left the Board room) from consideration of North West Development Agency Board business on 13 occasions, for the following reasons:

Board member	*Number of occasions*	*Interest*	
Maggie Chadwick	2	Skills Development Fund	May 1999
		SRB local bids	June 1999
John Dunning	2	Skills Development Fund	May 1999
		SRB Round six bids	July 2000
Felicity Goodey	1	SRB local bids	June 1999
Clive Jeanes	2	Skills Development Fund	May 1999
		SRB Round six bids	July 2000
Richard Leese	2	SRB local bids	June 1999
		SRB Round Five—Commonwealth Games bid	November 1999
Alan Manning	1	Skills Development Fund	May 1999
Dennis Mendoros	2	Skills Development Fund	May 1999
		SRB Round six bids	July 2000
Judy Robinson	1	SRB Round six bids	July 2000

Clive Jeanes also left the meeting for part of an item on the Small Business Service which was discussed at the Board meeting of the North West Development Agency in March 2000.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the scale and nature of the financial and other support provided by the North West Development Agency in the case of *(a)* Workington Town Centre, *(b)* Maryport Endowment, *(c)* Dovenby Hall, *(d)* Hills of the North, *(e)* Westlake Science Park, *(f)* Kingmoor Park, Carlisle, *(g)* Lillyhall Partnership, *(h)* Alston Foundry, *(i)* Cumbria Credits, *(j)* Guided Steps to Lifetime Learning, *(k)* Regeneration of Maryport Averdale, *(l)* Building Bridges, *(m)* Cleator Regeneration, *(n)* Cumbria Rural Regeneration and *(o)* Heart of Barrow. [133959]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The North West Development Agency funded the acquisition of the St. John's Precinct and Arcade at Workington Town Centre at a cost of £4.2 million. Funding support in respect of the Maryport Endowment, Dovenby Hall, Hills of the North, Westlakes Science Park, Kingmoor Park, Carlisle, Lillyhall Partnership and Alston Foundry was provided by English Partnerships prior to the establishment of the North West Development Agency. Financial assistance towards Cumbria Credits, Guided Steps to Lifetime Learning, Regeneration of Maryport Averdale, Building Bridges, Cleator Regeneration, Cumbria Rural Regeneration and Heart of Barrow was provided by Government Office for the North West under the Single Regeneration Budget programme prior to the establishment of the North West Development Agency. The North West Development Agency has now been given responsibility for the continuing management of English Partnerships and Single Regeneration Budget schemes in Cumbria.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many square feet are available under the terms of the lease being negotiated by North West Development Agency for occupation at Penrith. [133969]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The net lettable area being negotiated by the North West Development Agency for occupation at Penrith is 4,950 sq ft.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what purposes the Chief Executive of the North West Development Agency visited Copeland and Allendale in the last 12 months. [133968]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The purpose of the visit made by the Chief Executive of the NWDA to the Copeland and Allerdale areas in the last 12 months was to attend a meeting in Cockermouth with the Chief Executives of Allerdale borough council and Groundwork to discuss a feasibility study for the reclamation/redevelopment of Broughton Moor.

The Chief Executive of the NWDA also visited:

The Cumberland Pencil Factory in Keswick to discuss potential support to help keep the company in the town;

A site in Backbarrow, where the Agency was offering support to a potential inward investor through the Partnership Investment Programme; and

The Chief Executive of Cumbria Tourist Board to discuss various aspects of Tourism in Cumbria.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what office accommodation is available to the North West Development Agency and at what cost at Lillyhall, Workington. [133967]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The North West Development Agency is committed to building a managed workspace scheme at Lillyhall in 2001 as its contribution to the Lillyhall Partnership. Approximately 1,000 sq ft of the accommodation will be occupied by its Estate Management Staff. Design work has only just commenced but the cost of the building is projected to be in the region of £55 per sq ft gross (£35 per sq ft net of ERDF recovery).

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what indication he has received of the cost per square foot of office space being negotiated by North West Development Agency for occupation at Penrith. [133970]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The indicated office rent at Penrith is £12/sq ft.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations were made by the North West Development Agency to the DTI on the reductions in percentage levels of regional assistance payable in West Cumbria. [133965]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The North West Development Agency made strong representations on the case for West Cumbria, drawing on the Regional Strategy for the North West. The representations were considered by the DTI in developing a case to put to the EU Commission.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the names of the consultancies employed by the North West Development Agency over the last 12 months. [133963]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Over the last 12 months the North West Development Agency used the following consultancy services:

Eversheds
KPMG Management Consulting
Segal Quince Wickstead Ltd.
DTZ Pieda Consulting
PricewaterhouseCoopers
Addleshaw Booth & Co.
Asian Pacific Research Ltd.
T. Gill Consultancy
John Glester Consultancy Services
GVA Grimley
Cogent Strategies International Ltd.
Platt & Fishwick
Jill Berry
University of Salford
Dibb Lupton Alsop
Amitek UK Ltd.
Hay Management Consultants
HFT Gough & Co.
A. Scott
J. P. Clarke
MSL Search and Selection
Strategem Ltd.
Gary Gould
King Sturge & Co.
Angle Technology Ltd.
Turner & Townsend
John Jones
George Bowness
The North West Business Leadership
Sustainability North West
Dunlop Heywood & Co. Ltd.
Carigiet Cowen
John Diggle
Wigan MBC
Cumbria Tourist Board
Roger Tym & Partners
Manchester Innovation Ltd.
Business and Market Research
Colin McGrath
STMP Marketing Solutions Ltd.
Lambert Smith Hampton
Armstrong Watson & Co.
Povall Flood & Wilson
Gibson Thorpe Associates
Todd & Ledson
Business Interiors Group
Plunkett Foundation
Hammond Suddards
The Change People
Baker Associates
Enterprise 2000 Solutions plc
TSK Workplace Ltd.
Harry Wilson
Craig Associates
Onesource Information Services
Moody & Stanley
Grantley Lowe Associates

Jim Sherlock
P. S. Hill & Co.
Nimtech Malaysia
Intuition Training & Consultancy Ltd.
Pauline Soulsby
Stainforth Public Relations
B&I Artingstoll
Ashley Helme Associates Ltd.
Status (GB) Ltd.
W. M. Law & Son
Hayward Associates
Environmental Advice Centre Ltd.
Ann Fairclough Association
The Duckworth Group.

Planning

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on policies relating to contacts between planning offices and applicants. [135388]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Planning functions must be seen to be carried out with transparency and openness in order to retain public confidence in the decision making process. Planning officers must abide by the local code of conduct prepared by their local authority. The Government endorse the Local Government Association's "Probity in Planning" which recommends the practices and procedures which codes of conduct should cover, including guidance on discussions between planning officials and applicants.

Water Supply

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many cases of leakage in the water supply system there were, how much water was lost, and how much was spent to rectify these problems, in each of the last five years. [135231]

Mr. Meacher: There has been almost a 30 per cent. reduction in water leakage since the Water Summit in May 1997. The total volume of potable water lost through leakage is published annually by the Director General of Water Services in his report on leakage and the efficient use of water. For each of the last five years in England and Wales, the total leakage rates were as follows:

	Water lost (megalitres/day)
1995–96	4,980
1996–97	4,528
1997–98	3,989
1998–99	3,551
1999–2000	3,306

Information on the number of cases of leakage and on the amount of money spent tackling leakage is not held centrally. Details of water companies' overall capital expenditure were last published by the Director General of Water Services in the "Report on the financial performance and expenditure of the water companies in England and Wales 1999–00". In the next five years water companies will invest £15.6 billion in the water industry.

Carbon Dioxide

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by what percentage carbon dioxide emissions have been reduced since 1997. [135208]

Mr. Meacher: UK carbon dioxide emissions are provisionally estimated to have been about the same in 1999 as in 1997, and around 7.5 per cent. lower than in 1990. This follows a strong downward trend between 1990 and 1997. The levelling of emissions between 1997 and 1999 reflects a modest growth in overall energy demand, slightly lower output from nuclear power stations and lower imports of electricity from France, balanced by continued fuel switching towards gas.

The draft UK climate change programme, published in March, sets out a package of policies and measures to continue reducing carbon dioxide emissions over the next decade. It estimated that quantified policies and measures could reduce carbon dioxide emissions to 17.5 per cent. below 1990 levels in 2010 and that other elements of the programme would reduce emissions further and could achieve the Government's 20 per cent. goal.

Neighbourhood Warden Scheme

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the bids and *(b)* the successful projects under the Neighbourhood Warden scheme, stating the local authority in each case. [135803]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Question *(a)*: All bids:

Organisation	*Location*
London Borough of Lewisham	Honor Oak
London Borough of Hillingdon	Hayes/West Drayton
Southern Homes	Hackney
London Borough of Merton	Lavender/PhBrdg/Poll Hill
Southwark Council	Bermondsey
London Borough of Barnet	Graeme Park
London Borough of Hounslow	Cranford/Brentford/Hounslow
Liverpool Housing Trust	Dymchurch Estate, Liverpool
West Lancashire District Council	Skelmersdale, Liverpool
Eldonian Group Ltd.	Everton and Breckfield
Manchester Methodist Housing Association	Longsight and Levenshulme, Manchester
Irwell Valley Housing Association	Sale West
Derwent and Solway Housing Association	Moorclose and Westfield, Workington
Riverside Cheshire Housing Association	Wimslow

Organisation	*Location*
Knowsley Borough Council	Stockbridge Village, Knowsley
Oldham MBC	Derker and Stoneleigh
Bolton MBC	Great Lever, Hutton Lane, Deane
Manchester and Cheshire North British Housing	Gorton North, South and West, Manchester
Portsmouth City Council	Paulsgrove and Wymering
Gosport Borough Council	Town Ward
Milton Keynes Council	Fullers Slade
Adur District Council	Shoreham, Southwick and Fishergate
Slough Borough Council	Britwell, Haymill and Lishmore Park Estate
Pavillion Housing Association	North Town and Aldershot
Leeds City Council	Middleton Estate, Wythers Estate, Miles Hill Estate, Beckhill Estate, Potternewton Estate, Scott Hall Estate, South Seacroft, John O'Gaunts, Cottingley, Upper Beeston
Kirklees Metropolitan Council	Almondbury, Batley Town Centre, Holme Park, Bishop Court, Berry Brow, Botham Hall, Sycamore, Deighton and Bracken Hall, Moorside, Dewsbury Moor, Highfields and Gledholt, Howden Clough, London Park
Manor and Castle Development Trust, Sheffield	Fairleigh, Prince of Wales Road, Manor Park
Barnsley Community Safety Partnership	Sheffield Road/Doncaster Road, Kendray, Worsborough Dale and Bridge
Goodwin Resource Centre Association	Thornton, Hull
North West Leicestershire District Council	Greenhill Estate, Coalville
Nottingham City Council, Clfton and Wiford Area Committee	Clifton
Wansbeck	Northumberland
South Tyneside MBC	South Tyneside
Gateshead MBC	Gateshead
William Sutton Trust	Linthorpe Estate, Middlesbrough
Sedgefield District Council	Newton Aycliffe
Home Housing Association	Plains Farm, Sunderland
North Tyneside Council	North Tyneside
Plymouth City Council	Drake and Sutton Wards
Kerrier District Council/police	Mullion, Kerrier District
Huntingdonshire Housing Partnership	Oxmoor Estate, Huntingdon
Stevenage Borough Council	Bedwell, Shephall and Monkswood
Optima Community Association	Attwood Green, Birminghan
Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council	Parkfields, Whitmore Reans, Pendeford
Walsall Housing Regeneration Agency	Brownhills, Caldmore, Palfrey, Darleston, Willenhall
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough	Merthyr Dowlais Ward
Cardiff Community Housing Association	Adamsdown Lane Estate, Cardiff
Gwynedd Council	Maes Barcer Estate Caernarfon
Caerphilly County Borough	Gilfach and Graig y Rhacca
City and Council of Swansea Council	Hafod Area, Swansea
London Borough of Sutton	WrytheGrn/WandleValley
London Borough of Tower Hamlets	Bethnal Green/Victoria Park
London Borough of Hackney	Frampton Park/Morningside
Network Housing Association	Neasden, Brent
London Borough of Havering	Harold Hill and South Havering
Hyde Northside	Rosetower
Willow Park Housing Trust	Benchill
Trafford MBC	Partington and Carrington
Wirral Borough Council	Connaught Estate
Burnley Borough Council	Barclay, Coal Clough and Burnley Wood
Tameside MBC	Ashton
Wyre Borough Council	Wyre
Manchester Methodist Housing Association	Longridge and Shaw Heath Estate
William Sutton Trust	Breightmet and Bolton
Bury MBC	East Ward, Bury
Trafford MBC	Old Trafford
Wigan MBC	Worsley Mesnes North
Manchester Housing	North Manchester
Salford City Council	The Valley Estate
Vale of White Horse District Council	South Abingdon Estate
Aylesbury Vale District Council	Meadowcroft/Quarrendon
Horsham District Council	Ashington Parish
Canterbury City Council	Northgate, Hersden and Harbour Ward
Guildford Borough Council	Ash and Stoke
Hastings Borough Council	Hollington
Sheffield City Council	Lowedges, Jordanthorpe, Batemoor, Darnall/Stainforth Road,
Doncaster Borough Council	Mexborough
Wakefield District Community Safety Partnership	Chequerfield Estate, Pontefract
Rotherham Community Safety Partnership	Rawmarsh East
FCH Housing and Care	Crewton Gardens Estate
Greater Humberstone Management Group and Leicester City Council	Greater Humberstone

Organisation	*Location*
Boston Community Safety Partnership	Boston
Stockton on Tees B.C.	North Hornaby/Hardwick
Darlington B.C.	Darlington
Exeter City Council	St. Davids, St. James, Newton and Polshoe Wards
Avon and Somerset Constabulary	Parishes within the four Districts
Dacorum Borough Council	Bennetts End and Corner Hill
Norwich City Council	South East Norwich
Balsall Heath Forum	Balsall Heath, Birmingham
Stoke on Trent City Council	Bentilee and Berryhill
Wyre Forest Community Safety Partnership	Broadwaters, Kidderminster
Focus Housing Group	Hillfields, Coventry
Newport County Borough Council	Broadmead and Moorland Park (Lliswerry Ward)
Richmond Borough Council	Council Housing stock
Ealing FHA Ltd.	North Acton and Isleworth
Newham Borough Council	Council housing stock
Notting Hill Housing Trust	Dalgarno, Kensington
Lancaster West EMB	Ladbroke Grove
London Borough of Lambeth	3 areas
London Borough of Harrow	Wealdstone
London Borough of Camden	Gospel Oak
Hackney Est Man. and Dev.	Stamford Hill
Hackney Est Man. and Dev.	Kingsland
Poplar HARCA	Poplar 4 areas
Pimlico Village Housing Co-op	Lillington/Longmore Gardens, Westminster
Congleton	Borough
Carlisle City Council	Raffles, Botcherby and Harraby
Home Housing Association	Flimby
Safer Merseyside	Merseyside
Liverpool City Council	Dovecot, Smithdown, Kensington and Anfield
Pendle Borough Council	Bradley and Vivary Bridge
Cheshire County Council	Cheshire
Sefton MBC	South Sefton
St. Helens MBC	St. Helens
Chester District Housing Trust	Kingsway, Chester
Halton Borough Council	Hough Green
Wealden District Council	Town Farm Estate, Hailsham
Chiltern District Council	Chesham
Parchment Housing Group	Stakes Ward
Medway Council	Central Gillingham, Central Chatham, Frindsbury
Thanet District Council	Northdown Park Area and Newington Ward
Shepway District Council	Folkestone
Tandridge District Council	Bletchingley
Sovereign Housing Association	Hunters Hill/Omers Rise Area, Burghfield Common
Shaftesbury Housing Association	Cannock Lawn
Ealing Family Housing Association Ltd.	Amersham Road Estate, Reading
Southwight Housing Association	Isle of Wight
Elmbridge Housing Trust	North Walton Area
Epsom and Ewell Borough Council	Watersedge and Longmead Estates
Isle of Wight Association Ltd.	Chale Green Estate
Southampton City Council	Northam Estate, Nicholstown/Newtown/Radcliffe Road
Brighton and Hove Council	East Brighton
Burley and Hyde Park Community Safety Project	Burley and Hyde Park
Bradford Metropolitan District Council	Bierley, Holmewood, Wyke, Delph Hill, Buttershaw, Parkside, Allerton, Scholemoor, Canterbury, Howarth Road, Westroyd, Bradford Moor, Fagley, Thorpe Edge, Woodhouse
Preston Road Partnership	Preston Road
PROBE Ltd.	Marfleet
North East Lincolnshire Council	Grimsby (Nunsthorpe, Bradley Park, Grange, Yarborough)
Leeds Federated Housing Association	Beeston Hill
Boston Mayflower Ltd., Boston Borough Council, Boston Community Safety Partnership	Boston
Ashfield Partnership Against Crime	Welbeck Estate, Coxmoor Estate, Leamington Estate
Broxtowe Borough Council Community Safety Partnership	Broxtowe
Derby City Crime and Disorder Partnership	Rosehill and Pear Tree
Ollerton and Boughton Town Council	Boughton
South Derbyshire Crime and Disorder Partnership	South Derbyshire
South Kesteven District Council	New Beacon Community Info. Centre
Walbrook Housing Association	Hartington Street
Walbrook Housing Association	Poets Corner
Bolsover District Council	Bolsover
District of Easington	Peterlee/Seaham
Newcastle City Council	Byker/Heaton
Middlesbrough Council	Middlesbrough
Middlesbrough Council	Pallister Park/Berwick Hills

Organisation	*Location*
Home Housing Association	Arthurs Hill, Newcastle
Grangetown Residents Association	Grangetown
Derwentside District Council	Derwentside
Redcar and Cleveland	Brotton/Eston/Whale Hill
S. Somerset District Council	C. Yeovil and Chard
Caradon District Council	Saltash (part)
Sovereign Housing Association	Totnes (part)
North Somerset District Council	Two police beats in Weston-Super-Mare
Devon and Cornwall Housing Association	Barne Barton Estate, Plymouth
Rochford District Council	St Andrews and Roche
Suffolk Heritage Housing Association	Lowestoft
Waveney District Council	Lowestoft
Bedford Borough Council	Balliol Estate (Kempston), Shortstown, London Rd (Bedford), Carron Rd (Brickhill)
Luton Borough Council	Hightown and South, Bramingham, Sundon Park and Leagrave
Cambridge City Council	Cambridge City Centre
Flagship Housing Group	Thetford and Brandon
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	Peterborough
Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk—Housing Services Department	West Norfolk
South Beds District Council	Bedfordshire
Focus Housing Group	Bordesley Green
Trident Housing Association	Five Ways
Crime Concern	Greets Green
Spa Housing Association	Westlands Estate, Droitwich Spa
Warwick District Community Safety Forum	Leamington Old Town
Newcastle under Lyme Housing	Residential area of the town ward of Newcastle
Rugby Borough Council	Long Lawford
East Staffordshire Borough Council	Eton, Uxbridge, Waterside, Winshill, Uttoxeter Town
Telford and Wrekin Council	Woodside, Donnington Wood, Brookside, Dawley, Hadley, College/Arleston
Accord Housing Association	Eastgate Street
Staffordshire Moorlands District Council	Leek, Biddulph
Birmingham City Council	Kings Norton
Cardiff Community Safety Partnership	Ely and Caerau
Torfaen County Council	Cwmbran
Isle of Anglesey County Council	Llangefni
Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough	Cynon Valley
Gwalia Homes Housing Association Ltd.	Clase
Neath Port Talbot County Council	Sandsfields and Upper Apan Valley
Flintshire County Council	Buckley Deeside Flint Holywell and Mold
Glamorgan and Gwent HA	St. Mellons, East Cardiff
Conwy County Borough Council	Towyn, Llandudno, Kinmel Bay, Colwyn Bay
Carmarthenshire	Glanymor, Tyisha, Llwynhendy

Question *(b)*: All successful bids and their organisers:

Organisation	*Location*
London Borough of Lewisham	Honor Oak
London Borough of Hillingdon	Hayes/West Drayton
Southern Homes	Hackney
London Borough of Merton	Lavender/PhBrdg/Poll Hill
Southwark Council	Bermondsey
London Borough of Barnet	Graeme Park
London Borough of Hounslow	Cranford/Brentford/Hounslow
Liverpool Housing Trust	Dymchurch Estate, Liverpool
West Lancs District Council	Skelmersdale, Liverpool
Eldonian Group Ltd.	Everton and Breckfield
Manchester Methodist Housing Association	Longsight and Levenshulme, Manchester
Irwell Valley Housing Association	Sale West
Derwent and Solway Housing Association	Moorclose and Westfield, Workington
Riverside Cheshire Housing Association	Wimslow
Knowsley Borough Council	Stockbridge Village, Knowsley
Oldham MBC	Derker and Stoneleigh
Bolton MBC	Great Lever, Hutton Lane, Deane
Manchester and Cheshire North British Housing	Gorton North, South and West, Manchester
Portsmouth City Council	Paulsgrove and Wymering
Gosport Borough Council	Town Ward
Milton Keynes Council	Fullers Slade
Adur District Council	Shoreham, Southwick and Fishergate
Slough Borough Council	Britwell, Haymill and Lishmore Park Estate
Pavillion Housing Association	North Town and Aldershot

Organisation	*Location*
Leeds City Council	Middleton Estate, Wythers Estate, Miles Hill Estate, Beckhill Estate, Potternewton Estate, Scott Hall Estate, South Seacroft, John O'Gaunts, Cottingley, Upper Beeston
Kirklees Metropolitan Council	Almondbury, Batley Town Centre, Holme Park, Bishop Court, Berry Brow, Botham Hall, Sycamore, Deighton and Bracken Hall, Moorside, Dewsbury Moor, Highfields and Gledholt, Howden Clough, London Park,
Manor and Castle Development Trust, Sheffield	Fairleigh, Prince of Wales Road, Manor Park
Barnsley Community Safety Partnership	Sheffield Road/Doncaster Road, Kendray, Worsborough Dale and Bridge
Goodwin Resource Centre Association	Thornton, Hull
North West Leicestershire District Council	Greenhill Estate, Coalville
Nottingham City Council, Clfton and Wiford Area Committee	Clifton
Wansbeck	Northumberland
South Tyneside MBC	South Tyneside
Gateshead MBC	Gateshead
William Sutton Trust	Linthorpe Estate, Middlesbrough
Sedgefield District Council	Newton Aycliffe
Home Housing Association	Plains Farm, Sunderland
North Tyneside Council	North Tyneside
Plymouth City Council	Drake and Sutton Wards
Kerrier District Council/police	Mullion, Kerrier District
Huntingdonshire Housing Partnership	Oxmoor Estate, Huntingdon
Stevenage Borough Council	Bedwell, Shephall and Monkswood
Optima Community Association	Attwood Green, Birminghan
Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council	Parkfields, Whitmore Reans, Pendeford
Walsall Housing Regeneration Agency	Brownhills, Caldmore, Palfrey, Darleston, Willenhall
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough	Merthyr Dowlais Ward
Cardiff Community Housing Association	Adamsdown Lane Estate, Cardiff
Gwynedd Council	Maes Barcer Estate Caernarfon
Caerphilly County Borough	Gilfach and Graig y Rhacca
City and Council of Swansea	Hafod Area, Swansea

China

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which human rights issues he raised with the Chinese Government during his recent visit to China. [135512]

Mr. Prescott: I raised with Vice Premier Wu Bangguo the concerns which exist in the United Kingdom over human rights, but welcomed the dialogue that exists between our two countries on the issue, and the fact that it was being discussed by our officials on that very day in London.

Area Cost Adjustment

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the New Earnings Survey data on which his proposed adjustment to the Area Cost Adjustment is based; and if he will provide data for earnings in the South Gloucestershire Unitary Authority area on the same basis and over the same period. [135128]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The data used to calculate the proposed update to the Area Cost Adjustment (ACA) indicator is taken from the April 1999 New Earnings Survey (NES). We are unable to release the disaggregated data for individual authorities, as this would breach the confidentiality agreement under which the data is collected as it could reveal the identity of an individual firm or person.

Under the ACA methodology, the data for South Gloucestershire Unitary Authority contributes to the population-weighted average hourly wage calculation for the 'Rest of England'. The table sets out the average hourly wages for the five ACA areas using the April 1999 NES data.

ACA area	*1999 NES £ per hour*
City of London	15.55
Inner London	12.83
Outer London	11.40
South East Region	10.89
Rest of England	9.91

Local Government Finance

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will be consulting local authorities on his proposals for the Housing Revenue Account and HRA Subsidy for 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [135940]

Mr. Raynsford: We are issuing details of our proposals for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and HRA Subsidy for 2001–02 to all local housing authorities in England today. We are asking for comments by 30 November. Copies of the consultation documents are being placed in the Library of the House.

Next year will see the introduction of resource accounting within the HRA, including the new Major Repairs Allowance (MRA). Resource accounting is part of the new, more businesslike approach to local authority housing and the delivery of better quality services. The MRA will provide resources through the HRA subsidy system, of some £1.6 billion next year, to enable all authorities to maintain the condition of their housing stock

over the longer term. The resources are being drawn from the significantly increased provision for capital expenditure by local authorities announced as part of the Government's spending plans for 2001–02 to 2003–04 by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 18 July.

Our proposals for 2001–02 also include an additional £67 million to spend on day-to-day housing maintenance; the third year in which we have proposed increases. In addition, there will be further resources next year of £15 million to help authorities introduce resource accounting, with another £6 million to help tenants get involved in managing their homes through tenant participation compacts.

We are combating years of under-investment in the fabric of our council stock. We are determined to improve the quality of council housing and the services to tenants.

Refrigerants

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to phase out refrigerants with a high global warming potential. [135775]

Mr. Meacher: A new EC Regulation (2037/2000) on the control of ozone depleting substances came into force on 1 October. Ozone depleting substances such as CFCs and HCFCs, most commonly used in refrigeration systems, also have a high global warming potential (GWP)—CFC 12 and HCFC 22 have GWPs of 8100 and 1500 respectively; for comparison the GWP of carbon dioxide is defined as 1. From 1 January 2001 there will be a ban on the use of CFCs to maintain existing refrigeration equipment. Also, the use of HCFCs as refrigerants will be banned in most new equipment from 1 January 2001.

Industry has replaced CFCs and HCFCs with a variety of alternative refrigerants—many with a low GWP. However, in some applications there are no suitable alternatives currently available other than HFC 134a, which has a high GWP (1300), but does not deplete the ozone layer. We announced in the draft Climate Change Programme how we intend to deal with the growth in use of HFCs. The policy gives industry and users a clear signal to look closely at all the alternatives and to use HFCs only where other safe, technically feasible, cost-effective and more environmentally acceptable alternatives do not exist. The final Programme is to be published shortly.

Population Estimates

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimates of the population in 2016 in each English region and London have been used in devising the projected level of household formations proposed for the current round of draft regional planning guidance. [135738]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Draft reviews of regional planning guidance (RPG) submitted to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State since July 1999 have taken account of the Office for National Statistics 1996-based sub-national population projections. The projected population for each English region and London in 2016 are as shown. They have informed the Department's 1996-based household projections. However, household projections are only one of the factors to be taken into account in preparing the housing strategy in RPG (see Chapter 5 of PPG11 published on 17 October 2000).

Projected population of England in 2016, by Government Office Region

Thousand

	Population
North East	2,521.4
North West and Merseyside	6,812.6
Yorkshire and the Humber	5,164.7
East Midlands	4,455.4
West Midlands	5,391.4
East of England	5,823.2
London	7,608.5
South East	8,721.9
South West	5,332.8
England	51,831.9

Source:
ONS 1996-based Sub-national population projections

Railway Station Refurbishment

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has held with Railtrack plc regarding railway station refurbishment in West Sussex. [133243]

Mr. Hill: None.

Wembley Task Force

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions since April 2000 the Wembley Task Force has met; and if he will list those present at each meeting. [134835]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[pursuant to her reply, 30 October 2000, c.298–99W]:* The list shows the people who attended the meeting on 25 October 2000.

Chairman Sir Nigel Mobbs

Deputy Chairman Councillor Paul Daisley (LBB)

Acting Chief Executive—Tony Winterbottom (LDA)

Mike Appleton (EP)

John Duffy (GLA)

Mariana Spater (WPP)

Observers:

Niall Mackenzie (DCMS)

Ian O'Neill (DCMS)

Geoff Raw (LBB)

Guy Thornett (LDA)

Kieran McStravick (LDA).

Those who did not attend the meeting:

Derek Casey (Sport England)

Ian Fytche (Sport England)

Jonathan Branson (Sport England)

Ralph Ward (LDA).

TREASURY

Pensions Mis-selling

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the total administrative cost to date of the Pensions Mis-selling Review. [134265]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The estimates of administrative costs, first provided by the FSA to the Treasury Select Committee in early 1998, are £500 million for phase 1 of the review and £520 to £750 million for phase 2.

Mr. Love: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the sources were of the funds used by the largest six companies who mis-sold personal pensions to reinstate their pensions; and if he will make a statement. [135659]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government's policy follows that outlined in the reply by the then Economic Secretary to my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) on 24 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 750–51W.

The Government view is that, in principle, the costs of compensating victims of pensions mis-selling should be shared and borne in the same proportion as profits arising from mis-selling would have been.

NIRS2

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will make a statement on the progress which has been made in resolving the problems arising from the implementation of the NIRS2 computer system. [134511]

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if full functionality of the NIRS2 computer system has been achieved. [134646]

Dawn Primarolo: Following the well documented problems experienced with NIRS2 when it was first introduced, considerable progress has since been made and the Inland Revenue now regards the system as stable. Since April 1999, when the Inland Revenue took responsibility for the system, it has worked with the suppliers to ensure that full functionality is in place.

Inheritance Tax

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the administration and compliance costs of inheritance tax. [134648]

Dawn Primarolo: Costs of administration were £30.1 million for the year 1999–2000, or 1.5 pence per pound collected. I have no current estimate of the compliance costs of inheritance tax; they were estimated for 1986–87 at about 4 pence per pound collected. (Sandford et al, "Administrative and Compliance Costs of Taxation", Fiscal Publications, 1989).

Tobacco

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the percentage of tax taken on each pound of rolled tobacco for each of the past 10 years for which figures are available. [134407]

Dawn Primarolo: The information on hand rolling tobacco can be found in the HM Customs and Excise "Tobacco Factsheet", page 4, 'Prices and Taxation Analysis', a copy of which is in the House of Commons Library.

Taxation Statistics

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the change in the overall level of taxation has been over *(a)* the past year and *(b)* the past six months. [134970]

Dawn Primarolo: Updated estimates and forecasts will be published in the pre-Budget Report.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of paying a specific benefit through the pay packets on *(a)* claimants' behaviour and *(b)* the labour market. [134518]

Dawn Primarolo: The Working Families Tax Credit, as a tax credit rather than a welfare benefit, is paid through the wage packet. This reduces the stigma attached to receiving in work support and clearly demonstrates the reward of work compared to welfare.

The Government continue to monitor the effects of the Working Families Tax Credit.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the basis was of the forecast contained in the Treasury press release of 7 September 1999 that 1.5 million people would receive the Working Families Tax Credit. [134607]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The forecast contained in the Treasury press release of 7 September 1999 was based on the best information available at that time. It used survey data from both the Family Resources Survey and the Family Expenditure Survey up to 1997–98 and built on DSS experience of operating Family Credit and Disability Working Allowance.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent estimate he has made of the level of fraud in the Working Families Tax Credit. [134591]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* There is no statistically valid data currently available from which a meaningful estimate of the level of fraud in tax credits can be made.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the labour market effect of the Working Families Tax Credit; and what assessment he has made of the report from the Institute of Fiscal Studies on the labour market impact of the Working Families Tax Credit. [134630]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The Working Families Tax Credit is one of a number of reforms to make work pay for those on the lowest incomes in work. Treasury estimates of the possible impact on labour supply of the complete package of reforms—including changes to employee National Insurance and income tax rates—were published in "Tackling Poverty and Making Work Pay—Tax Credits for the 21st Century" (The Modernisation of Britain's Tax and Benefit System,

Number 6, March 2000, paragraph 2.13). These estimates took into account recent research and were based on methodology used by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in 1999 study: "Entering Work and the British Tax and Benefit System".

Tax Harmonisation

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on tax harmonisation within the European Union. [134972]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's approach to EU tax issues is based on fair tax competition, not tax harmonisation. At the recent Feira European Council in June, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor persuaded the EU to accept exchange of information rather than a withholding tax on cross-border savings income as the way forward. This illustrated the success of the Government's policy of constructive engagement on EU issues.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Luff: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the coal used by steam locomotives on heritage and voluntary railways will be subject to the climate change levy. [134509]

Mr. Timms: Coal used to propel trains will be exempt from climate change levy provided they are not being used for the transportation of passengers to from or within:

a) a place of entertainment, recreation or amusement or

b) a place of cultural, scientific, historical or similar interest.

VAT (Fuel)

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his current estimate of the income from VAT on petrol and diesel sales in the United Kingdom, assuming present pump prices continue unchanged until the end of the financial year. [135086]

Mr. Timms: Forecasts of total VAT receipts are published at the time of the Budget and the pre-Budget Report.

Smuggling

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on progress in the review of the value of fiscal marks as a deterrent to tobacco forestalling and to aid anti-smuggling efforts; and when the review will be completed. [135879]

Dawn Primarolo: The review of the value of fiscal marks as a deterrent to tobacco forestalling and to aid anti-smuggling was completed and the results published in the Regulatory Impact Assessment laid in the Library of the House of Commons in April 2000. Fiscal marks to counter smuggling will be introduced with effect from 1 April 2001. Restrictions on clearances of tobacco from duty-suspended storage to counter forestalling will be in place for Budget 2001.

Bank Closures

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what notification is required to *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the public authorities prior to the closure of high street bank branches; and if he will make a statement. [135532]

Miss Melanie Johnson: None.

Euro

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent studies his Department has undertaken on the impact of the euro on the UK economy. [135469]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government have set out five economic tests which define whether an economic case can be made for membership of EMU. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has said we will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

Registration

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made since 9 March 1999 on the review by Her Majesty's Customs of the impact of registration on growing businesses. [135873]

Dawn Primarolo: Since the publication of the results of the consultation exercise on 9 March 1999, Customs have consulted widely with small business representatives and academics. The outcome of these consultations will inform future Budget decisions.

Tax Returns (Internet)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the live pilot of electronic VAT returns. [135876]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs and Excise have been developing a system to allow businesses to send their VAT returns securely over the internet. Following introduction of enabling legislation in the Finance Act 1999, and secondary legislation in February 2000, a limited live pilot of internet VAT returns started on 1 March 2000.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1034W, on tax returns and the internet, if he will publish the data for each month since 1 January 1997 on how many self-assessment tax returns were *(a)* issued, *(b)* received, *(c)* waiting to be processed and *(d)* processed; and if he will make a statement. [134238]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The Inland Revenue's self-assessment internet service is the first in a series of electronic services which will be delivered in line with the Government policy that all transactions with Government should be capable of being done electronically by 2005.

The architecture of the internet service has not only been designed to cope with the increase in take-up of the self-assessment internet service, but will serve

enhancements to that service and future services, such as that for companies, which will be delivered over the next three years.

The statistical data requested are available only on a monthly basis from May 1998 for the Tax Years 1997–98 et seq. and are as detailed.

Tax Year/Date	*SA returns issued*	*SA returns received*	*SA returns processed*	*SA returns waiting to be processed*
1997–98				
3 May 1998	8,547,334	259,674	81,451	178,223
31 May 1998	8,633,913	702,870	319,585	383,285
28 June 1998	8,711,634	1,298,673	781,249	517,424
2 August 1998	8,788,923	2,083,105	1,446,595	636,510
30 August 1998	8,845,663	2,787,577	2,021,854	765,723
27 September 1998	8,897,137	3,895,601	2,711,470	1,184,131
1 November 1998	8,954,973	4,944,042	3,912,100	1,031,942
29 November 1998	9,000,034	5,342,335	4,677,158	665,177
3 January 1999	9,024,722	5,816,006	5,165,156	650,850
31 January 1999	9,030,450	7,913,563	6,005,521	1,908,042
28 February 1999	9,086,725	8,254,640	7,252,124	1,002,516
28 March 1999	9,116,935	8,374,888	7,973,651	401,237
1998–99				
2 May 1999	8,734,295	306,529	109,778	196,751
30 May 1999	8,826,638	805,864	432,451	373,413
27 June 1999	8,891,744	1,370,936	879,982	490,954
1 August 1999	8,967,094	2,167,722	1,559,826	607,896
29 August 1999	9,015,798	2,900,715	2,111,840	788,875
30 September 1999	9,057,063	4,472,780	2,938,795	1,533,985
31 October 1999	9,109,718	5,006,960	3,931,560	1,075,400
28 November 1999	9,137,453	5,397,759	4,658,370	739,389
2 January 2000	9,150,632	5,873,843	5,148,274	725,569
31 January 2000	9,125,743	7,872,689	5,867,559	2,005,130
27 February 2000	9,178,845	8,343,965	7,041,913	1,302,052
2 April 2000	9,214,442	8,506,751	8,043,818	462,933
1999–2000				
30 April 2000	8,763,125	202,063	0	202,063
28 May 2000	8,874,848	652,810	33	652,777
2 July 2000	8,955,640	1,321,170	536,960	784,210
30 July 2000	9,004,347	2,010,712	1,112,762	897,950
3 September 2000	9,054,837	2,885,753	1,851,942	1,033,811
1 October 2000	9,095,909	4,200,312	2,592,546	1,607,766

Fuel Tax (Farmers)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the increased revenue to the Exchequer if diesel fuel supplied to farmers were taxed at the rate of other diesel fuel. [135277]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* It is not possible to estimate accurately the revenue impact of increasing the rate of duty applied to diesel fuel used by farmers because there are no estimates of the amount of fuel used in vehicles covered by paragraphs 2 to 5 of Schedule 1 to Hydrocarbon Oils Duties Act 1979.

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the amount of fuel taxed at a lower rate for farmers which was sold in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [135278]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* There are no estimates of the amount of fuel used in vehicles covered by paragraphs 2 to 5 of Schedule 1 to Hydrocarbon Oils Duties Act 1979.

Clearances of gas oil amounted to 6.964 million litres in 1999–2000 and raised duty of £211.2 million. However, sectors other than farming are entitled to use gas oil, for example construction and mining.

Annuities

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the review on annuities is expected to report. [135733]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Various proposals have been put forward as alternatives to the annuity purchase requirement for pension schemes. An announcement will be made in due course if it is decided that any changes are required.

Beekeepers

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to introduce a tax rebate for beekeepers. [134641]

Dawn Primarolo: While the Government keep all taxes under review, there are no plans at present to introduce a tax rebate for beekeepers. Any changes would be considered as part of the Budget process.

Community Amateur Sports Clubs

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to introduce tax exemptions for community amateur sports clubs. [135732]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Many community amateur sports clubs are already exempt from corporation tax on the income they earn from their members, and the subscriptions of their playing members are exempt from VAT. On 29 September DETR published a Green Paper, "Modernising Local Government Finance", which included, at Annex E, a section inviting views on rate relief for non-profit-making sports clubs.

Domestic Heating Fuel

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by how much *(a)* the pre-tax cost of a litre of domestic heating fuel, *(b)* the fuel duty on a litre and *(c)* the VAT on a litre has increased by (i) percentage and (ii) actual terms since January 1999; and how much additional revenue the Treasury has received as a result. [135124]

Mr. Timms: Information on the prices of different fuel products is available in "Energy Trends", published monthly by the DTI. There is no excise duty on standard grade heating oil. The rate of VAT applying to domestic heating oil has remained at 5 per cent. since it was reduced to that level from 8 per cent. in September 1997.

Estimating the additional revenues accrued by the Government as a result of the rise in the price of heating oil is difficult because we need to make assumptions about the way in which consumers fund the rise in the price of fuel. If expenditure is diverted predominantly from standard-rated goods towards expenditure on heating oil, VAT receipts may actually fall.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many appeals against closure of magistrates courts there were in 1990; and if he will make a statement. [135204]

Jane Kennedy: The information required to answer the question of how many appeals against the closure of magistrates courts there were in 1990 is not readily accessible. I will in due course, write to the hon. Member to provide the information he requests. The Lord Chancellor's Department assumed responsibility for policy for magistrates courts from the Home Office in April 1992.

The Government's policy is that magistrates courts are best managed locally by magistrates courts committees under the provisions of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. Decisions concerning the future of magistrates courts are for local magistrates courts committees to determine.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many magistrates courts there were in England and Wales in *(a)* 1990 and *(b)* 1999. [135205]

Jane Kennedy: My Department does not hold records for 1990. Prior to 1992 magistrates courts were the responsibility of the Home Office. I will in due course write to the hon. Member to provide an estimate of the number of courts in 1990.

Definitive information about courthouse numbers was not held centrally until 1995, when there were 516 magistrates courts in England and Wales. In 1999 there were 436.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* appeals and *(b)* successful appeals against closure of magistrates courts there were in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999. [135203]

Jane Kennedy: The information requested is set out in the table.

	Appeals	*Successful appeals*
1997	17	2
1998	26	1
1999	9	1

Civil Courts (IT)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on progress in installing new IT equipment and systems in the civil courts. [135125]

Jane Kennedy: The Court Service has a rolling programme of improving existing IT systems in the County Courts, together with a long-term business and IT strategy programme.

The most recent significant IT change in the civil courts was the implementation of the Civil Justice Reforms. In order to implement this change effectively within the required timescales without excessive risk, the Court Service (in partnership with its IT supplier) made wide ranging changes to pre-existing systems. Core IT and business changes were implemented to the defined timetable—subsequent refinements have been introduced to improve operational effectiveness.

However, it is recognised that there remains significant scope to exploit further the potential of modern technologies (as was highlighted by the *civil.justice.2000* report). This theme is at the centre of the Modernising the Civil Courts (MCC) programme which we are developing. We plan to issue a consultation paper on MCC later this year. That paper will highlight a wide range of business areas where the application of a diverse set of technologies could significantly enhance the administration of civil justice. In order to ensure that change to IT systems is delivered in the most effective way, a department-wide Information and Communications Technology strategy has been developed—this will ensure that the IT deployed is fully in line with the principle of the Modernising Government initiatives.

MCC will involve a long-term programme of change. Thus, in parallel with it, the Court Service has begun to, and will continue to, improve current IT facilities. For example:

A series of upgrades to CaseMan (the main county court IT system) have been implemented to deliver operational changes. These have incorporated a range of changes proposed by end users. There are standing processes to continue with future releases (taking on board end user input);

A major upgrade of CaseMan has been contracted for with our IT provider and will eliminate old stand-alone systems next year;

Earlier this year a facility was introduced that allows major issuers to issue claims by submitting data electronically through telephone lines. Previously the submission of this data had been restricted to tape and disk;

In the near future, the Court Service plans to pilot new electronic arrangements for handling certain applications to the county courts;

The Court Service will also shortly be piloting kiosk based access to its electronic services in conjunction with the University of Wolverhampton, the CAB and Telford local authority;

The Court Service is piloting a video conferencing network linking Cardiff, Manchester, Leeds and the Royal Courts of Justice;

The Court Service rolled out laptops to the majority of the Judiciary. The services provided include access to the internet in general along with specific access to online legal sources related to the Human Rights Act;

The Court Service relaunched its website that provides online access to a wide range of civil court forms and guidance along with general information as to the operation of the courts. This site is one of the most accessed websites provided by UK central Government.

Judicial Appointments Annual Report

Angela Smith: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he will publish the second Judicial Appointments Annual Report; and what information it will contain. [136148]

Mr. Lock: The Judicial Appointments Annual Report, covering the period 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000, is published today. The report includes comprehensive narrative descriptions and detailed statistics on appointments to the judiciary, Queen's Counsel, Lay Magistrates and General Commissioners of Income Tax. It also includes information on the Lord Chancellor's appointments policies and procedures and recent developments such as the implementation of Sir Leonard Peach's recommendations. Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The report is also available on the internet.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Act 2000

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to bring the Terrorism Act 2000 into force. [136029]

Mr. Straw: We are currently working towards an implementation date for the Terrorism Act 2000 of 19 February 2001. Certain powers required in advance of the Terrorism Act taking effect have already been brought into force by Commencement Orders under section 128 of the Act. On 12 October 2000, provisions relating to United Kingdom-wide and Northern Ireland specific codes of practice were brought into force, paving the way for consultation on those codes. Today further provisions, such as those setting out the procedure for the making of secondary legislation, including the orders to bring the codes of practice into force, have been commenced. The provisions brought into force today also include provision for rules of court dealing with certain procedures under the Act and for the establishment of the Proscribed Organisations Appeals Commission.

Immigration Services Commissioner

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress the Immigration Services Commissioner has made in establishing the scheme of regulation for immigration advisers and service providers. [136030]

Mrs. Roche: Copies of the Immigration Services Commissioner's Rules, Code of Standards and Complaints Scheme have now been published on the internet at http:www.oisc.org.uk. A copy of these documents will be placed in the Library.

The Commissioner has also published guidance to advisers on competencies in relation to the provision of immigration advice or immigration services. The Commissioner will be making an announcement in the near future as to the process for making a case for exemption or an application for registration.

Justice and Home Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the outcome was of the Justice and Home Affairs Council held in Brussels on 28 September; and if he will make a statement. [136031]

Mr. Straw: Nigel Sheinwald, the United Kingdom's Permanent Representative to the European Union, represented the United Kingdom at the 28 September Council. The main matters dealt with at the meeting were as follows:

The list of A points was adopted in full, except items on the Schengen Information System, Sirene, on which one member state maintained a Parliamentary Scrutiny Reserve, and on minimum standards for the security of passports.

Common Visa List:

The Council agreed to a mechanism for deferring the entry into force of a visa exemption for certain third countries.

Further discussion would take place in Committee of Permanent Representives (COREPER) and the European Parliament would be reconsulted. This is a measure in respect of which the United Kingdom has not sought to opt in.

Europol: money laundering:

Political agreement was reached on extending the Europol Convention to cover all money laundering and the accompanying Council declaration on predicate offences, subject to consideration of the European Parliament's Opinion. This would formally be adopted at the Council's meeting on 30 November.

Commission Proposal for a draft Council Directive on minimum standards on asylum procedures:

The Commission presented this proposal as its first response to the call by the Tampere European Council in October 1999 to create a common European asylum system. The proposal set out minimum procedural guarantees to ensure that member states could process cases quickly and fairly at a national level and that secondary movements of asylum seekers were avoided. Common standards and time limits would assist in dismissing inadmissible and unfounded cases. Member states gave a general welcome to the proposal, which was remitted to the Asylum Working Group for further consideration.

Reception conditions for asylum seekers:

This was an orientation debate on key points in the Presidency's discussion document. No conclusions were drawn but the Presidency stressed that this was a key priority and it would be seeking to agree conclusions at the Justice Home Affairs (JHA) Council in November in order to provide a background to an anticipated legislative proposal from the Commission.

Council Decision to create a provisional Eurojust Unit:

Political orientation was reached on key elements of the text, subject to consideration of the European Parliament's opinion, which had not yet been received. The text was remitted to COREPER for resolution of some technical issues and the language regime, at the request of one member state. A new Article was agreed which would allow the Commission to be associated fully with the general work of the unit, particularly in relation to the development of the permanent Eurojust, and which would also enable the Commission to lend its expertise to cases considered by the unit where these fell within Commission competence. The United Kingdom maintained its Parliamentary scrutiny reservation.

Framework Decision relating to the status of victims in criminal proceedings:

This text was remitted to COREPER to resolve the outstanding issue on compensation. One member state lifted its scrutiny reserve provided that a recital was included to the effect that the Decision did not imply an obligation to treat victims as parties to criminal proceedings. The UK maintained its Parliamentary scrutiny reservation.

Commission proposal to create a European Judicial Network in civil and commercial matters:

The Commission presented this draft Council Decision which was aimed at improving and developing existing judicial co-operation arrangements and providing the public with practical information about access to justice in cross-border litigation. The Civil Law Committee would discuss this further.

Protection of the environment through the criminal law: orientation debate

There was general support for the introduction of measures to combat environmental crime, in order to establish an European Union acquis in this area. The Presidency would produce an initiative for a new instrument incorporating the aspects of the 1998 Council of Europe Convention on Environmental Crime which were acceptable to all member states.

Preparation for the joint JHA/European Council of Finance Ministers (ECOFIN) Council:

Over lunch, the Council prepared the joint ECOFIN/JHA Council meeting of 17 October on financial crime. The Presidency explained that this would feature a debate on a common and coherent European Union strategy towards more effective co-operation in the financial sector, law enforcement and judicial co-operation.

Brussels Regulation:

The Presidency urged Ministers to pursue this dossier in their capitals as it was a key element of the mutual recognition programme on civil law. The Commission advised that it would be issuing modified proposals during the next week on the e-commerce aspects of mutual recognition in light of the European Parliament's Opinion.

Other items:

The Council noted a communication from Germany on the need for Community-level action on fighting dogs, calling for a Commission initiative on this matter. The Commission doubted whether there was a legal basis for Community action but undertook to examine this in greater detail.

Mixed Committee with Iceland and Norway:

The Committee heard progress reports on the draft Common Visa List, which Iceland and Norway would apply, and on the application of the Schengen arrangements to the Nordic countries.

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the outcome was of the Justice and Home Affairs Council held in Luxembourg on 17 October; and if he will make a statement. [136032]

Mr. Straw: I attended this Council meeting. The main matters dealt with at the meeting were as follows:

The list of A points was agreed in full, including the three items outstanding from the Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA) held on 28 September.

Draft framework decision on money laundering, the identification, tracing, freezing, seizing and confiscation of instrumentalities and the proceeds of crime:

There was a broad political orientation, subject to certain parliamentary reserves and the European Parliament opinion to a common minimum maximum penalty of four years and that all member states should be obliged to lift reserves in respect of tax offences to the 1990 Council of Europe money laundering Convention's provisions on confiscation of assets. The Council also agreed a declaration to the effect that minimum maximum penalties would be considered on a case by case basis for future instruments.

Draft Convention on improving mutual assistance in criminal matters, with particular reference to the fight against organised crime, the laundering of the proceeds of crime and financial crime:

There was broad agreement, on the basis of a Presidency discussion document, to the principle that legal assistance should not be refused solely on the grounds that an investigation concerned a tax offence or involved the lifting of bank secrecy. A number of member states considered that such measures should be subject to judicial control; others also raised the practical difficulties involved in supplying lists of bank accounts in the absence of a central register. The Commission acknowledged that member states would have flexibility in how they chose to abolish grounds of refusal founded in bank secrecy or tax matters; they should none the less aim to establish efficient systems for providing assistance in such matters. Work on the Convention would continue at expert level on the basis of the discussion document.

Presentation of the conclusions of the seminar from 13–15 September on the laundering of the proceeds of organised crime in Europe:

The Presidency presented the conclusions. There was no discussion.

Proposal for a council decision establishing a community mechanism for the co-ordination of civil protection in the event of emergencies—presentation by the Commission:

The Presidency and the Commission presented their respective proposals. Two member states welcomed the call for an assessment of respective national capabilities with a view to greater co-ordination between existing national structures. Others argued for a European Civil Protection Agency and a third for more European Union-financed training.

Other items:

I proposed a greater operational role for the Chief Police Officer's Task Force and proposed using a Council Decision to place this work on a more formal footing. The Presidency concluded that the Council should return to this as necessary.

One member state registered the need for Justice Ministers to have greater involvement in discussions concerning Organization de Lutte anti-Fraud.

Finally, the Council adopted conclusions regarding the ETA murder the previous night in Spain.

On the afternoon of 17 October, the Justice and Home Affairs Council met jointly with the ECOFIN Council. I represented the United Kingdom.

Following a debate on strategy towards more effective co-operation in the financial sector, law enforcement and judicial co-operation, the Council adopted conclusions, a copy of which have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes he intends to make to the UK anti-money laundering agencies in response to the conclusions reached at the Justice and Home Affairs Council of 17 October. [134812]

Mr. Charles Clarke: At the Justice and Home Affairs Council held on the morning of 17 October formal agreement was given to the draft Framework Decision covering the exchange of information between the Financial Intelligence Units of member states. It is unlikely that compliance with this instrument will require any change in the organisation of the National Criminal Intelligence Service, which performs this function in the United Kingdom.

In the afternoon of 17 October Justice and Interior Ministers came together with their Finance Minister colleagues to discuss the fight against financial crime. This joint Council invited the member states to have in place special multi-disciplinary units to fight money laundering. However such units could either be new or, where necessary, build upon existing arrangements. In the United Kingdom we are satisfied that the present anti-money-laundering role discharged by the National Criminal Intelligence Service fully meets the objectives identified by the joint Council.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what provision he has made to provide asylum seekers with *(a)* legal representation, *(b)* housing, *(c)* health services, *(d)* welfare advice and *(e)* language provision. [133824]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office makes grants under section 23 of the Immigration Act 1971 to organisations responsible for providing free legal representation in connection with appeals to those subject to immigration control. For this financial year 2000–01 £56,000 has been paid to the Northern Ireland Law Centre. As with previous years grants will also be awarded to the Immigration Advisory Service and the Refugee Legal Centre. The amounts to be paid to each organisation have yet to be

finalised. In addition the Legal Services Commission awards funding under contract to franchised solicitors to provide free representation and advice.

An asylum seeker can, as part of an application for support to the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), apply for accommodation. Where accommodation is provided this will normally be in one of the dispersal areas. No asylum seekers will be given accommodation unless he or she has specifically requested it.

All asylum seekers and their dependants are entitled to receive medical treatment under the NHS.

For this financial year 2000–01 the Home Office has provided funding of almost £5.5 million to the voluntary sector to provide for the establishment and maintenance of one-stop services. This service provides support to asylum seekers through a comprehensive reception service including assisting asylum seekers who need to access statutory services and the services which providers, under contract to NASS, are required to provide.

School age children of asylum seekers are entitled to attend school.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers have been dispersed in each month of this year from the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham to other locations in the United Kingdom by his Department. [134565]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not available. Statistics are not currently available on the location of asylum seekers before they applied for support from the National Asylum Support Service.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers living in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham are in receipt of vouchers from his Department. [134564]

Mrs. Roche: The information is not available in the form requested. As at the end of September 3,300[1] asylum seekers, including dependants, had been allocated vouchers only by the National Asylum Support Service and were living in the London region. Currently information on asylum seekers who have been allocated vouchers only from the National Asylum Support Service is available only by region and not London Borough.

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 100

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many failed asylum seekers and dependants are currently receiving support from the National Asylum Support Service. [134517]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not currently available.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers in London are currently receiving support from the National Asylum Support Service; and of those how many are receiving support in the form of vouchers only. [134516]

Mrs. Roche: As at the end of September 2000, 3,500[1] asylum seekers, including dependants, had been allocated support by the National Asylum Support Service and were living in the London region. Of these, 3,300 were allocated vouchers only and 200[1] were allocated accommodation and voucher support due to special or exceptional circumstances which meant they had to stay in London.

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 100.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are currently receiving support from the National Asylum Support Service; and of those how many are receiving support in the form of vouchers only. [134515]

Mrs. Roche: As at the end of September, 14,200[1] asylum seekers, including dependants, had been allocated support by the National Asylum Support Service. Of these, 4,700[1] had been allocated voucher support only.

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 100.

Immigration

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have *(a)* applied for and *(b)* been granted leave to remain on the basis that they have AIDS or are HIV positive in each of the last five years. [134468]

Mrs. Roche: I regret that this information could be obtained only by examination of individual case records and is therefore available only at disproportionate cost.

Police Pensions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans to reform police pensions. [134524]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 213W.

Extradition

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress made towards common EU standards on extradition, in the context of Tampere Conclusion Number 35. [134680]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Gentleman to Council Document number 9737/3/00, A Programme of Measures to implement the principle of mutual recognition of decisions in criminal matters, which was deposited in the Library on 16 October 2000.

The Programme of Measures contains proposals for instruments to simplify extradition procedures between member states of the European Union. The first proposal is automatic recognition of the arrest warrant issued by the requesting judicial authority. There are also instruments to apply the principles that (a) member states will either extradite a person who is subject to a final sentence or enforce their sentence and (b) that member states will transfer a convicted person or enforce their sentence, particularly in the case of convicted persons who have escaped.

As with all proposals in the Programme of Measures, the Government will seek to ensure that the instruments are consistent with the relevant provisions in the European Convention on Human Rights.

The review of extradition which the Home Secretary announced on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 574, is considering how to simplify and streamline extradition from the United Kingdom generally, and within the European Union in particular. A consultation paper will be available in the new year.

Homosexual and Lesbian Relationships

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to facilitate the civil registration of homosexual and lesbian relationships; and if he will make a statement. [134767]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have made no plans to do so at the present time.

Arrests (Football Grounds)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many arrests have been made at football grounds in each of the last three years. [134780]

Mr. Charles Clarke: 3,307 people were arrested at Premier and Nationwide league grounds during the 1997–98 season, 3,341 during the 1998–99 season, and 3,137 during the 1999–2000 season.

Sentencing Policy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if his review of sentencing policy will consider disparities in sentencing for similar offences in different parts of the country. [134781]

Mr. Boateng: The terms of reference of the Review of the Sentencing Framework were specifically set within the context of the Government's objectives of protecting the public by reducing crime and re-offending, and dispensing justice fairly and consistently, and the issue of consistency is one which the review team will have in mind in making their recommendations.

Measures are already in place to try to improve consistency in sentencing. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 places a statutory duty on the Court of Appeal to have regard to the need to promote consistency in sentencing when framing or revising sentencing guidelines.

In addition, the Magistrates Association has issued revised sentencing guidelines earlier this year. It has also asked benches in England and Wales to consider, in light of sentencing data for 1998, whether sentencing practices should be reviewed and ultimately adjusted within their areas.

Members of the European Parliament (By-elections)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will seek to provide for by-elections when UK seats in the European Parliament fall vacant. [134661]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The European Parliamentary Election Regulations 1999 set out the arrangements for filling vacancies in the European Parliament. Any vacancy must be filled by the next available candidate on the list of the registered party to whom the vacancy has fallen, thus preserving the proportional nature of the representation for that region. Only if that list is exhausted can a by-election take place. We have no plans at this time to alter these arrangements.

Vandalism

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions about tenants who daub graffiti or commit other acts of vandalism on their estates. [134548]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There have been no discussions on this specific issue. However, my Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are working closely to take forward the Policy Action Team's report on Anti-Social Behaviour (PAT 8), in particular the provision of comprehensive good practice guidance for Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and Anti-Social Behaviour on the three key issues of prevention, enforcement and resettlement.

The PAT 8 report on Anti-Social Behaviour was published in March and builds on the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to take forward action to combat anti-social behaviour, including problems such as graffiti, vandalism, nuisance neighbours, and other problems on housing estates.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he has given to *(a)* the police and *(b)* the Crown Prosecution Service on the apprehension and prosecution of graffiti vandals. [135011]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Guidance to the Crown Prosecution Service is not a matter for the Home Office. I have not identified any need for guidance to the police on this subject but I do attach great importance to the protection of communities from defacement of property and other forms of disorder. The Government's consultation paper "Reducing Public Disorder: the Role of Fixed Penalty Notices" canvassed views on proposals to use fixed penalties for a range of offences. Views were specifically sought on what offences, including criminal damage, might be suitably dealt with in this way.

Police (Early Retirement)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers have taken early retirement in each of the past three years. [134549]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is no provision within the police pension scheme for officers to retire early with an actuarially reduced pension. Maximum pension benefits are payable on completion of 30 years' service and most officers retire having completed at least 30 years' service. Some retire with shorter service on reaching compulsory retirement age. There is provision within the scheme for

officers to retire on completion of 25 years' service, with a pension payable from age 50. Officers may also retire with an immediate pension before completion of 30 years or reaching compulsory retirement age, on the grounds of ill-health. Figures for ill-health retirements are as follows:

Police officers medically retiring in England and Wales

Year	*Number*
1997–98	1,810
1998–99	1,642
1999–2000	1,232

Schengen Information System

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Schengen Information System inquiries have been made by the UK to date; and what estimate he has made of the number in total for the first year of the UK membership. [134804]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The United Kingdom does not yet put data on the Schengen Information System or have access to the Schengen Information System data. No inquiries of the System have therefore been made. The United Kingdom will not make any inquiries of the System during its first year of membership.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his assessment of the level of security of Schengen Information System *(a)* data and *(b)* premises. [134794]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Schengen Implementation Convention provides for comprehensive controls over national sections of the Schengen Information System (N.SIS), the central service computer facility in Strasbourg (C.SIS) and the data on the Schengen Information System itself. I have no reason to doubt that the security arrangements in place are in accordance with these provisions and I have no plans to seek to have them modified.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which national authority will supervise the UK element of the Schengen Information System under Article 114 of the Convention. [134792]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The United Kingdom's application of 20 May 1999 to participate in certain provisions of the Schengen Implementing Convention stated that the United Kingdom Data Protection Commissioner will be the supervisory authority responsible for the activities described in Article 114.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many United Kingdom nationals have requested that a check be made on the Schengen Information System data pertaining to them and on the use made thereof; what procedure is involved; and if he will make a statement. [134791]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As the United Kingdom does not put data on the Schengen Information System or have access to the data, there are at present no arrangements in the United Kingdom enabling individuals to make checks.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many UK subjects have been included in the Schengen Information System. [134683]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The United Kingdom does not put data on the Schengen Information System (SIS) or have access to SIS data.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on his policy towards recognising documents issued by the Schengen Joint Supervisory Authority indicating that a passport holder is the subject of criminal imposture, as indicated in the JSA opinion of March 2000; [134817]

(2) if he will make a statement on his policy towards providing information to the Schengen Information System on people of usurped identity, where that individual has been the subject of imposture by a criminal. [134803]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Replacement travel documents issued by United Kingdom authorities for those that have been stolen or misappropriated are easily distinguishable from the stolen documents. Accordingly, the United Kingdom does not intend adopting the procedure followed by other Schengen states which involves the recording of fingerprints and photographs of persons whose identity has been usurped.

The Joint Supervisory Authority does not issue documents indicating usurped identity.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those categories of suspects from the UK that are placed on the Schengen Information System; and if he will list those categories of information which may be stored. [134790]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Articles 95, 98 and 99 of the Schengen Implementing Convention lists those categories of wanted persons and suspects whose details may be placed on the Schengen Information System. Article 94 of the Schengen Convention sets out those items of information which may be stored in relation to any person whose details are entered on the Schengen Information System. The United Kingdom is not yet participating in the System and has, therefore, made no entries in relation to any suspect from the United Kingdom. A copy of the Schengen Implementing Convention may be found in the Library.

Schengen States (Illegal Immigration)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has made to the Schengen Secretariat with regard to combating illegal immigration to the UK from Schengen states; and if he will make a statement. [134809]

Mrs. Roche: No representations have been made to the Schengen Secretariat (as part of the incorporation of Schengen into the European Union, the Schengen Secretariat has been subsumed into the Council Secretariat).

However, the United Kingdom is fully engaged in discussions at European Union level about combating illegal immigration, both from within and from outside the European Union. The United Kingdom is co-operating fully within Europol, where combating illegal immigration and trafficking receive top priority. We have extensive

operational contacts with our European Union colleagues. We also hold regular bilateral discussions with policy officials of other member states.

The United Kingdom is currently involved in negotiations on a number of measures at European Union level, aimed at combating illegal immigration, clandestine entry and facilitation. These include: a draft Directive defining the facilitation of unauthorised entry, movement and residence; a draft Council Framework Decision on strengthening the penal framework to prevent the facilitation of unauthorised entry and residence; and a draft Council Directive about harmonisation of financial penalties imposed on carriers transporting into the territory of member states third-country nationals not having the documents necessary for admission.

Police Fatalities and Injuries

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers have been *(a)* killed and *(b)* permanently incapacitated in the course of their duties in each of the past three years. [134540]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The most recently available details for officers killed in the course of their duties are as follows. The figures include officers killed in vehicle accidents, attacks by assailants, and in pursuing a suspect.

Police officers killed in England and Wales

	Number
1997	4
1998	6
1999	8

The numbers of officers permanently incapacitated in the course of their duties is not collected centrally.

Women Police Officers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of police officers in each force area are women. [134389]

Mr. Charles Clarke: On 31 March 2000 the percentage of women officers in each force in England and Wales was as follows:

Police force	*Percentage of officers who are female*
Avon and Somerset	14
Bedfordshire	18
Cambridgeshire	15
Cheshire	16
City of London	13
Cleveland	16
Cumbria	16
Derbyshire	14
Devon and Cornwall	16
Dorset	16
Durham	18
Dyfed Powys	14
Essex	17
Gloucestershire	18
Greater Manchester	18
Gwent	16
Hampshire	17
Hertfordshire	19
Humberside	15
Kent	18
Lancashire	17
Leicestershire	16
Lincolnshire	13
Merseyside	16
Metropolitan Police	16
Norfolk	15
Northamptonshire	15
Northumbria	16
North Wales	16
North Yorkshire	14
Nottinghamshire	14
South Wales	14
South Yorkshire	17
Staffordshire	20
Suffolk	16
Surrey	17
Sussex	16
Thames Valley	17
Warwickshire	15
West Mercia	16
West Midlands	22
West Yorkshire	16
Wiltshire	17
Total England and Wales	17

Drugs

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what study he has made of a possible link between consumption of soft drugs and subsequent addiction to hard drugs. [134533]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is undoubtedly the case that most users of Class A drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, started off by using so called soft drugs, normally cannabis. But establishing a causal link is extremely difficult because of a range of compounding factors such as socio-economic background; family functioning; adolescent risk taking behaviour and delinquency; and peer affiliations. But even allowing for these factors there is increasing evidence of a causal link. For example, research from New Zealand published last year concluded that, even allowing for a wide range of compounding factors, regular cannabis users (50 times a year) had a 59.2 times higher risk of using other illicit drugs than non cannabis users.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been convicted of cannabis possession in each of the last three years. [134538]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Available information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database is given in the table.

Number of offenders convicted[1] at all courts in England and Wales for possession of cannabis, 1997–99[2]

	Convictions
1997	17,275
1998	22,643
1999[2]	22,623

[1] Where principal offence only
[2] Provisional

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what discussions he has had with his counterparts in the European Union about their approach to soft drugs; [134534]

(2) what assessment he has made of the approach of the Dutch Government to soft drugs. [134535]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have regular discussions with counterparts in the European Union covering a wide range of issues relating to comparative drug policies and practices. One of the outcomes is the European Union Drug Strategy for 2000–04.

Where Dutch policy is markedly different is in relation to their attempts to separate the markets for so called soft drugs, and drugs such as heroin and cocaine. The most obvious example of this is the Dutch policy towards the sale and possession of cannabis for personal use through the system of "coffee shops". Such a policy, whereby use of cannabis remains illegal but the laws are not enforced, cannot be a model for the United Kingdom; nor have I seen any evidence that it would be desirable to follow this example.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the proportion of violent crime which is *(a)* drug-related and *(b)* alcohol-related. [134997]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Statistical data are not collected on offences which may have been committed while an offender is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. However, both the British Crime Survey and the NEW-ADAM programme of interviewing and drug testing arrestees shed some light on the links between drugs, alcohol and crime.

The 2000 British Crime Survey reported that 40 per cent. of victims of violent crime believed their attacker was under the influence of alcohol, while 18 per cent. believed that the perpetrator was under the influence of drugs.

The Home Office has commissioned research by the University of Cambridge to continue the NEW-ADAM programme of interviewing and drug testing arrestees. The second report on this research was published in August 2000 (Home Office Research Study 205, Drugs and Crime: The results of the second developmental stage of the NEW-ADAM programme).

The research, which was undertaken at four sites (in London, Liverpool, Nottingham and Sunderland), found that over two thirds of arrestees (69 per cent.) tested positively for at least one drug (excluding alcohol) and 20 per cent. tested positive for alcohol. In terms of specific violent offences, of the 41 individuals arrested for assault 61 per cent. tested positive for a drug and 32 per cent. for alcohol; of the 18 individuals arrested for breach of the peace 33 per cent. tested positive for a drug and 61 per cent. for alcohol.

It should be remembered that because an arrestee tested positive for alcohol or drugs or a victim believed that a perpetrator was under the influence of drugs or alcohol it does not necessarily mean that the consumption of alcohol or drugs caused the crime to be committed. As a result, while the NEW-ADAM study and the British Crime Survey advance our knowledge of the links between drugs, alcohol and crime, it will always be difficult to calculate a single percentage figure calculating precisely what proportion of crime is alcohol or drug-related.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the extent of the sale and use of illegal drugs in Worcestershire. [134510]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is the responsibility of local Drug Action Teams to assess the extent of drug misuse in their area and to plan and implement action to tackle the problem. I understand that the Worcestershire Drug Action Team commissioned a survey which reported on young people's perceptions of drug use in 1997–98. 73 per cent. of those sampled were between 14 and 16 years old. 53 per cent. of the sample said they had been offered drugs. 31 per cent. were offered drugs by a friend. 39 per cent. of those who were offered drugs accepted the offer.

Nationally, the extent of drug misuse among the population aged 16 to 59 is measured through the British Crime Survey (BCS), which includes a self-report element on drug misuse. The findings focus particularly on those aged 16 to 29. The BCS includes a regional, but not county-level, breakdown of statistics. In the 1998 survey—the latest available—21 per cent. of respondents aged 16 to 29 in the Midlands region had used any drug in the last year.

Drug misuse among young teenagers is measured by a schools survey among secondary school children aged 11 to 15. Interim findings from the 1999 schools survey were published in May 2000. Nationally, 12 per cent. of pupils aged 11 to 15 had used any drug in the last year. The interim findings do not include a regional breakdown.

The Government will publish, early in 2001, the results of a Key Informant Survey which will contribute to baseline estimates for the availability of drugs as perceived by practitioners in Drug Action Teams and police forces.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the proportion of violent assaults on the person that are *(a)* alcohol-related and *(b)* drug-related. [134539]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Statistical data are not collected on offences which may have been committed while an offender is under the influence of alcohol or drugs. However, both the British Crime Survey (BCS) and the NEW-ADAM programme of interviewing and drug testing arrestees shed some light on the links between drugs, alcohol and crime.

The 2000 British Crime Survey reported that 40 per cent. of victims of violent crime believed their attacker was under the influence of alcohol while 18 per cent. believed that the perpetrator was under the influence of drugs.

The Home Office has commissioned research by the University of Cambridge to continue the NEW-ADAM programme of interviewing and drug testing arrestees. The second report on this research was published in August 2000 (HORS 205, Drugs and Crime: The results of the second developmental stage of the NEW-ADAM programme).

The research, which was undertaken at four sites (in London, Liverpool, Nottingham and Sunderland), found over two thirds of arrestees (69 per cent.) tested positively for at least one drug (excluding alcohol) and 22 per cent. tested positive for alcohol. In terms of specific violent offences, of the 41 individuals arrested for assault, 61 per cent. tested positive for a drug and 32 per cent. for alcohol; of the 18 individuals arrested for breach of the peace, 33 per cent. tested positive for a drug and 61 per cent. for alcohol.

It is important to note that the BCS data rely on the victim's perception of whether or not alcohol or drugs were present at the time of the incident. The NEW-ADAM research is currently based on a small example which is geographically confined. It should also be noted that 29 per cent. of the available NEW-ADAM sample were not interviewed because they were thought to be intoxicated with alcohol. The BCS and NEW-ADAM survey advance our knowledge of the links between drugs, alcohol and crime. However, they do not provide a definite answer as to whether or not the presence of alcohol or drugs have caused a particular crime.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the profits made by drug-dealers trading in *(a)* soft and *(b)* hard drugs. [135016]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Within the major research programme that underpins our 10-year national Drugs Strategy, there are two current research projects that will give us a better understanding of the economics of drug dealing. One project is attempting to size the United Kingdom drug market and estimate total expenditure, based on a consumption analysis. Another is looking at the middle levels of the United Kingdom drug market (i.e. between importer and street dealer level), to improve our understanding of secondary drug distribution in the United Kingdom. The results of both pieces of research will be published next year.

Schengen Liaison Officers

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Schengen liaison officers are stationed in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [134806]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None. Consideration will be given to the exchange of Schengen liaison officers when the United Kingdom is fully participating in the police and judicial provisions aspects of the Schengen Implementation Convention.

Police Officers (Ethnic Origin)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of police officers in England and Wales are *(a)* black, *(b)* Asian and *(c)* Jewish; [134526]

(2) what proportion of police officers in each force area are members of an ethnic minority. [134390]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available details on the proportion of officers in the police service in England and Wales in 1999–2000 belonging to particular ethnic groups are as follows:

Black—0.8 per cent.

Asian—0.7 per cent.

Other ethnic groups—0.7 per cent.

The overall proportion of police officers belonging to an ethnic minority in each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales on 31 March 2000 is given in the table.

Police force area	*Percentage ethnic minority officers on 31 March 2000*
Avon and Somerset	1.1
Bedfordshire	3.6
Cambridgeshire	2.6
Cheshire	0.4
City of London	2.3
Cleveland	1.2
Cumbria	0.3
Derbyshire	2.3
Devon and Cornwall	0.3
Dorset	0.5
Durham	0.8
Dyfed Powys	0.4
Essex	1.2
Gloucestershire	1.3
Greater Manchester	2.5
Gwent	1.3
Hampshire	0.8
Hertfordshire	1.4
Humberside	0.7
Kent	1.2
Lancashire	1.3
Leicestershire	4.4
Lincolnshire	1.1
Merseyside	1.8
Metropolitan Police	4.0
Norfolk	0.9
Northamptonshire	3.0
Northumbria	0.8
North Wales	0.4
North Yorkshire	0.4
Nottinghamshire	2.9
South Wales	1.2
South Yorkshire	2.3
Staffordshire	1.5
Suffolk	1.3
Surrey	1.4
Sussex	0.9
Thames Valley	2.2
Warwickshire	2.2
West Mercia	1.3
West Midlands	4.6
West Yorkshire	2.6
Wiltshire	0.9
England and Wales	2.2

Asset Freezing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress made at EU level on mutual recognition of decisions on freezing of assets. [134681]

Mrs. Roche: In my reply to the hon. Gentleman of 28 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 585W, I stated that discussions were taking place between member states of

the European Union with regard to the application of the principle of mutual recognition applied to restraint of assets.

Since this reply there have been no further substantive discussions on this issue. However, I understand that the Presidency intend to table a draft legal instrument on the subject shortly.

Anti-Jewish Posters

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what investigations have been initiated into the circulation of posters in North London urging the murder of Jewish people. [134527]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I understand that the Metropolitan police service has received a number of allegations regarding the dissemination of anti-Semitic material in North London. Arrests have been made. Papers have been submitted to the Crown Prosecution Service for a decision on the correct course of action to pursue in relation to the arrested people.

Inquiries are being vigorously progressed to determine the source of the material.

Public Demonstrations

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost was of the policing of public demonstrations in London in each of the past three years. [134391]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am advised by the Metropolitan police that there are around 4,000 "public order" events in London each year which require special policing arrangements. Financial information is not separately maintained on these events and the information requested is not therefore available.

Sexual Offences Review

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to complete his review of sexual offences and to bring forward recommendations. [134545]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The consultation paper "Setting the Boundaries: reforming the law on sex offences", which was published in July 2000, made comprehensive recommendations to the Government for a reform of the law on sexual offences. The recommendations are at present out for consultation.

The closing date for comments is March 2001. The Government will consider the proposals in the light of the comments received with a view to legislation in due course.

Police Overtime

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total cost to public funds of police overtime payments in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [134450]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information available is set out in the table.

Police overtime

£000

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000[1]
Police officer	[2]—	208,740	249,720
Support staff	[2]—	38,511	32,364
Total	[2]—	247,251	282,084

[1] Provisional
[2] Not available
Source:
The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy Police statistics

UK Overseas Offenders

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy to seek enforcement of sentences of UK subjects abroad where better social reintegration of the offender will result; which countries his Department assesses as permitting better social reintegration; and if he will make a statement. [134682]

Mrs. Roche: The enforcement of custodial sentences in the interests of social rehabilitation imposed in another European Union country is already possible under the Council of Europe Convention on transfer of sentenced persons.

The Prison Service considers requests from both United Kingdom and foreign nationals who wish to be repatriated abroad.

Underlying consideration of requests is the principle that prisoners' chances of successfully reintegrating into society are substantially improved if prisoners are allowed to serve their sentence in their own country, where they will benefit from access to their own cultural traditions, language, and be able to strengthen links with the community into which they will eventually be released. As a consequence of this policy, there is no list of countries that permit better social reintegration.

Police Complaints Procedure

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the reform of the procedure for considering complaints against the police. [134452]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are committed to finding ways of increasing public confidence in the investigation of complaints against police misconduct through wider accessibility, more openness and a greater degree of independence. We are currently considering these issues following a consultation exercise based on reports of studies by Liberty and KPMG. A second round of consultation to a limited field and covering specific issues will take place during November.

The Government have undertaken to announce their views by the end of the year.

Bicycles

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many fixed penalty fines have been issued for cycling on the footway since they were introduced. [134522]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There were 665 substantive fixed penalties notices known to have been issued in the period 1 August to 31 December 1999 for the office of cycling on the footway (pavement).

Two police force areas were unable to provide this information and a further three were able to provide data for only the later months of the year.

Similar information for 2000 should be available in the spring of 2001.

Reprimands and Final Warnings

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what period applies for the purpose of rehabilitation in respect of *(a)* reprimands and *(b)* final warnings. [134343]

Mr. Boateng: The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 does not currently contain any reference to reprimands and final warnings. The Government consulted last year on a proposal to bring reprimands and final warnings within the provisions of the Act with an immediate rehabilitation. We intend to make this change whenever an appropriate legislative opportunity arises.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* reprimands and *(b)* final warnings have been administered since the provisions of sections 65 and 66 of the Crime and Disorder Act 19[illegible] were bought into force; and how many cautions were administered in the corresponding preceding period. [134342]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The latest information, taken from the Home Office Cautions Databases, is given in the table.

Number of offenders aged 10–17 cautioned, given reprimands or final warnings for all offences, England and Wales, October 1997—December 1998 and January 1999—March 2000[1]

Number of offenders given a	*October 1997 to December 1998*	*January 1999 to March 2000*[1]
Caution	[2]135,164	117,186
Reprimand	[2]—	7,098
Final warning	[2]—	2,919
Total	[2]135,164	127,203

[1] Provisional
[2] While piloting of reprimands and final warnings began on 30 September 1998, the Home Office Cautions Database does not separately identify these new warnings from formal cautions until 1 January 1999.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the current regime for controlling the use of animals in tests in preventing genetic modification of animals. [134458]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The production of genetically modified animals, as well as their use in experiments or other scientific procedures, is controlled under the terms of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. The Government are satisfied that the 1986 Act adequately caters for transgenic animals used in scientific procedures, and that there is no need for separate controls.

Since the genetic modification of animals was first achieved, the number of genetically modified animals produced and used under the terms of the Act has increased considerably, and is likely to continue to increase. The production and use of such animals allows new areas of medical and other scientific research to be explored; provides the potential for investigating a wide variety of conditions including cancer, cystic fibrosis and multiple sclerosis; and allows the quality of the science in many areas of research and testing to be improved.

The vast majority (over 95 per cent.) of GM animals produced and used are mice. Other genetically modified animals produced and used under the 1986 Act are: rats; rabbits; pigs (for xenotransplantation research); sheep (modified, for example, to produce human proteins in their milk which can be extracted and used to treat human medical conditions); domestic fowl and fish.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to offer the *(a)* police, *(b)* prison and *(c)* fire services a stakeholder pension. [134374]

Mr. Charles Clarke: All police officers have access to the police pension scheme. Consideration is being given to whether police service stakeholder pension arrangements should be made available to police officers who earn less than £30,000 a year, and who wish to top up their benefits.

All prison officers have access to the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (PCSPS). Civil Service stakeholder pension arrangements will be made available to prison officers and other civil servants covered by the PCSPS who earn less than £30,000 a year and who wish to top-up their PCSPS benefits. The Cabinet Office is making the necessary provision on behalf of all civil service employers.

The provision of stakeholder pensions is currently under consideration for the fire service.

Policing (Rural Areas)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about his policy on policing in rural areas. [134995]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Our policy is to ensure that all areas of the country, urban and rural, benefit from a modern, effective and responsive police service and we are increasing funding for rural forces to take account of the additional costs associated with policing rural areas. The police funding formula includes a sparsity element which directly benefits rural forces and an extra £15 million from the Police Modernisation Fund has been allocated this year to 31 forces covering rural areas. This rises to £30 million from 2001–02. The forces concerned will be required to demonstrate real improvements in the policing of rural areas in return for the extra money.

Illegal Weapon Imports

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he plans to take to prevent weapons legally bought on the continent from being brought into this country where they are illegal. [135010]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The manufacture, sale and importation of 14 bladed, pointed and other offensive weapons have been banned under Section 141 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988, in addition to flick knives and gravity knives, the sale of which was already banned under the Restrictions of Offensive Weapons Act 1959. The law prohibits the possession of offensive weapons in a public place, and the possession of knives in public without good reason or lawful authority, with the exception of a folding pocket-knife with a blade not exceeding three inches. Strict controls apply to the possession and importation of firearms.

The enforcement of controls on the importation of weapons is a matter for HM Customs and Excise, who deploy their resources in accordance with their assessment of risk.

Terrorism Advocates

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his policy is towards the activities in the United Kingdom of individuals advocating terrorism abroad. [135015]

Mr. Straw: The Government are determined to ensure that the United Kingdom is not used as a base for the planning and preparation of terrorism here or abroad. The Terrorism Act 2000, which is due to come into force early next year, further strengthens our response to international terrorism by the inclusion of powers to proscribe organisations concerned in international terrorism; to counter the financing in this country of terrorism anywhere overseas, and includes a new offence of incitement here to commit an act of terrorism, wholly or partly outside the United Kingdom, where that act, if committed in England and Wales, would constitute one of a number of specified offences, in particular murder.

It is a high priority for the police and the Security Service to counter the activities of those who may be seeking to support terrorism outside the United Kingdom. Where there is any evidence of terrorist activity, action is taken either under the criminal law, supported as necessary by the current counter-terrorist legislation, or under immigration legislation.

Racially Motivated Crimes

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportions of victims of racially-motivated crimes in each of the past three years have been *(a)* black, *(b)* Asian and *(c)* white. [135001]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not available.

Information on racist incidents is collected annually from all police force areas by HMIC. However, the ethnicity of the victim is not collected.

The British Crime Survey collects information about racially motivated crimes and the ethnicity of victims. The last available figures are for the year 1995. The survey estimates that there were in total about 382,000 racially motivated crimes in 1995. 238,000 of these incidents were against white people (62 per cent. of the total); 42,000 against black people (11 per cent); 41,000 against Indians (11 per cent) and 60,000 against Pakistanis or Bangladeshis (16 per cent).

Voting Systems

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of the desirability of adopting *(a)* proportional representation or *(b)* an alternative vote system for Westminster parliamentary elections; [135031]

(2) what assessment he has made of the effect of introducing an alternative vote system in UK parliamentary elections on the degree of proportionality between votes cast and hon. Members returned. [135026]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government have not made such an assessment of the alternative vote (AV) system. The Independent Commission on the Voting System proposed that its recommended system, AV plus, be put before the electorate in a referendum as an alternative to first-past-the-post. While no change will be made to the voting system without an endorsement by the general public in a referendum, a decision has yet to be made as to its timing and the question to be asked.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of alternative voting arrangements at the May 2000 local elections under the provisions of the Representation of the People Act 2000; and if he will make a statement. [134872]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* My Department has received reports from all the local authorities which ran pilot schemes under the terms of the Representation of the People Act 2000.

Copies have been placed in the Library and are accessible on the Home Office website. We are considering their conclusions, in consultation with electoral administration and local authority associations.

Applications to run pilot schemes in May 2001 have been invited.

Metropolitan Police

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what change there has been in the level of ethnic minority recruitment to the Metropolitan Police since the publication of the Macpherson report. [135000]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The figures show the number and percentage of minority ethnic recruits for the three years 1997–98, 1998–99 and the first six months of 2000–01.

Year	*Number of minority ethnic officers recruited*	*Minority ethnic recruits as a percentage of all recruits*
1997–98	62	5.2
1998–99	92	5.6
1999–2000	71	7.1
2000[1]	27	5.2

[1] March to September

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers in Essex *(a)* have sought application forms to join the Metropolitan police force in the past six months and *(b)* subsequently made a formal application; and how many Metropolitan

police officers have (i) sought application forms to join the Essex police force and (ii) subsequently made a formal application, in the same period. [135093]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information is not collected centrally in the form requested.

I am advised by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) that, between 1 April 2000 and 17 October 2000, it received 98 inquiries from officers of Essex police. The MPS does not have a central record of the number of formal applications by officers of Essex police. Since 1 July, three officers from Essex police have joined the MPS.

I am advised by Essex police that 21 officers from the MPS have applied to join the force since 1 January 2000. Three of those officers have subsequently withdrawn their applications. No information is currently available centrally about the outcome of the other applications.

Young Offender Units

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received concerning the number of youth offender units in North Yorkshire. [134381]

Mr. Boateng: I have received no recent representations about establishments for young offenders or other youth justice arrangements in North Yorkshire.

Secure establishments for juveniles are provided by the Prison Service, local authorities and the private sector under contract to the Youth Justice Board. North Yorkshire juvenile remandees and offenders normally go to Wetherby Young Offender Institution which has 360 places, Hassockfield secure training centre in County Durham which has 40 places, and local authority secure units in East Yorkshire, Leeds and Sheffield which have 43 places.

Representation of the People Regulations 1986

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to collect figures on the number of prosecutions which take place each year under paragraph 29 of the Representation of the People Regulations 1986. [134408]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Paragraph 29 of the Representation of the People Regulations 1986 makes it an offence to withhold the information which an electoral registration officer (ERO) needs to compile the electoral register. The ERO can report to the Crown Prosecution Service for possible prosecution any cases of refusal to provide the information, or of giving false information. Figures for prosecutions are not separately collected, but indications from EROs are that they are relatively rare. We see no necessity to monitor such cases specially and have no plans to do so.

Animal Procedures Committee

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) whether the deliberations of the Animal Procedures Committee on applications for licences under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 which are referred to them include consideration of the scientific value and validity of the procedures involved; [134357]

(2) if he will impose a duty on the Animal Procedures Committee to consider the interests of patients and patient groups; [134356]

(3) how many members of the Animal Procedures Committee *(a)* have had and *(b)* hold full registration as a medical practitioner. [134355]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: When considering any application for a project licence under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 the Secretary of State is required to weigh the likely adverse effects on the animals concerned against the benefit likely to accrue as a result of the programme to be specified in the licence. Any application referred to the Animal Procedures Committee for its consideration will contain such an assessment.

One of the 20 members of the Animal Procedures Committee is medically qualified, and is in current practice.

The Act requires the Animal Procedures Committee to have regard both to the protection of animals against avoidable suffering and unnecessary use in scientific procedures and to the legitimate requirements of science and industry. The latter requirement would include a consideration of the interests of patients and patient groups. The Committee's deliberations may also encompass the scientific merit and scientific validity of the proposals, as well as the welfare costs to the animals used.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what organisation is responsible for advising him on the legitimate concerns of patients and patient groups with regard to the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. [134354]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Section 5(4) of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 requires that any application to use protected animals in research must be subjected to a detailed cost/benefit assessment by Home Office inspectors. The likely adverse effects on the animals concerned must be weighed against the benefits likely to accrue as a result of the proposed programme of work. Clinical benefit, including more cost-effective health care, are factors which may be taken into account in this assessment. A number of sources of advice are available to me on the benefits of research. These include the Animal Procedures Committee and the relevant professional bodies. I also receive representations on issues relating to the use of animals in scientific procedures from a wide range of interest groups, including medical charities.

Police Officers (Hand Guns)

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the use of hand guns by police officers in England and Wales. [134714]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The use of firearms by police officers is governed by section 3 of the Criminal Law Act 1967, which requires that the use of force in the prevention of crime or apprehension of offenders must be reasonable in all the circumstances, and by operational guidance provided by the Association of Chief Police Officers.

The deployment of armed officers in accordance with the relevant legislation and guidance is an operational matter for individual chief officers of police.

Entertainments Licences

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to review the guidance given to local authorities on the procedures for consulting local residents on applications for entertainments licences; [134700]

(2) what guidance his Department provides to local authorities on the procedures for consulting local residents on applications for entertainments licences; [134701]

(3) what guidance his Department provides to local authorities on the consideration of objections to applications for entertainments licences. [134699]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have been asked to reply as I have responsibility for public entertainment licensing.

The Home Office has not issued guidance to local authorities on these issues. We have, however, included in our White Paper "Time for Reform" (Cm 4696), which was published on 10 April, proposals for reform of public entertainment licensing, with new requirements for local resident consultation.

Community Rehabilitation Centres

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the community rehabilitation centres operating in England and Wales indicating *(a)* the proximity of each to prisons, *(b)* the nature of their environs, *(c)* the number of places available at each centre and *(d)* the number of staff employed at each centre. [135405]

Mr. Boateng: The term community rehabilitation centre is not one which is in common use. However, there are currently 100 approved probation and bail hostels in England and Wales. The table shows the name of each approved hostel, the probation area it is in and the number of bedspaces it currently provides. Approved hostels provide an enhanced level of supervision in the community, as well as a supportive and structured environment, within which residents can be supervised effectively for as short a period as is necessary. They are intended as a base from which residents take full advantage of community facilities for work, education, training, treatment and recreation. They would therefore normally be based near to such facilities. Some approved hostels are near to prison establishments, but we do not have this information centrally. The number of staff employed in each approved hostel varies according to the number of bedspaces provided, but on average it would be between 18 and 24. Again, more detailed information is not centrally available.

Probation area	*Hostel*	*Beds*
Avon	'Ashley House	22
Avon	Bridge House	18
Avon	Brigstock Road	28
Bedfordshire	Bedford	25
Bedfordshire	Napier Road	20
Berkshire	'Elizabeth Fry	21
Berkshire	Manor Lodge	22
Berkshire	St. Leonards	22
Cambridgeshire	Peterborough	26
Cheshire	Bunbury House	22
Cheshire	Linden Bank	22
Cornwall	Meneghy House	18
Cumbria	Bowling Green	24
Derbyshire	Burdett Lodge	32
Devon	Lawson House	19
Dorset	The Pines	18
Dorset	Weston	25
East Sussex	Brighton	16
Essex	Basildon	26
Gloucestershire	Ryecroft	16
Greater Manchester	Ascot House	22
Greater Manchester	Bradshaw House	26
Greater Manchester	Chorlton	27
Greater Manchester	Hopwood House	18
Greater Manchester	St. Josephs	29
Greater Manchester	Wilton Place	27
Greater Manchester	Withington Road	32
Hampshire	Dickson House	18
Hampshire	Southampton	22
Hampshire	The Grange	22
Hereford and Worcester	Braley House	21
Humberside	Queens Road	19
Humberside	Scunthorpe	19
Inner London	'Katherine Price Hughes	19
Inner London	'Kelley House	21
Inner London	'Hestia Streatham	28
Inner London	'Hestia Battersea	25
Inner London	Camden House	26
Inner London	Canadian Avenue	24
Inner London	Ellison House	25
Inner London	Tulse Hill	26
Kent	Fleming House	25
Lancashire	Haworth House	26
Lancashire	Highfield House	22
Leicestershire	Howard House	18
Leicestershire	Kirk Lodge	32
Lincolnshire	Wordsworth House	18
Merseyside	'Adelaide House	20
Merseyside	Canning House	18
Merseyside	Merseybank	25
Merseyside	Southwood	29
Middlesex	Ealing	19
Middlesex	Seafield Lodge	22
Norfolk	John Boag House	25
North East London	Westbourne House	40
North Wales	Plas-y-Wern	18
North Wales	Ty Newydd	23
North Yorkshire	South View	20
Northamptonshire	Bridgewood	23
Northumbria	'Ozanam House	25
Northumbria	'St. Christophers	18
Northumbria	Cuthbert House	25
Northumbria	Pennywell	18
Nottinghamshire	Astral Grove	14
Nottinghamshire	Southwell House	18
Nottinghamshire	Trent House	19
Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire	Abingdon Road	18
Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire	Clarks House	18
Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire	Milton Keynes	16
Somerset	Glogan House	18
South East London	Beckenham Road	20
South Glamorgan	Mandeville House	26
South West London	Kew	18
South Yorkshire	Norfolk Park	39
South Yorkshire	Rookwood	39

Probation area	*Hostel*	*Beds*
South Yorkshire	Town Moor	39
Staffordshire	Staitheford House	20
Staffordshire	Wenger House	26
Staffordshire	Wharflane House	22
Suffolk	Lightfoot House	22
Suffolk	The Cottage	18
Surrey	St. Catherines Priory	18
Teesside	Nelson House	22
Teesside	The Crescent	20
Warwickshire	McIntyre House	18
Warwickshire	Kenilworth Road	19
West Glamorgan	Emroch House	18
West Midlands	Bilston	15
West Midlands	Carpenter House	22
West Midlands	Crowley House	18
West Midlands	Elliott House	20
West Midlands	Stonnall Road	12
West Midlands	Sycamore Lodge	32
West Midlands	Welford House	19
West Yorkshire	[1]Cardigan House	25
West Yorkshire	[1]Ripon House	24
West Yorkshire	[1]St. Johns	28
West Yorkshire	Albion Street	24
West Yorkshire	Elm Bank	22
West Yorkshire	Holbeck	24
Total		2,257

[1] Voluntary managed approved hostels

There are currently no hostels in the following probation service areas:

Durham

Dyfed

Gwent

Hertfordshire

Mid Glamorgan

Powys

Shropshire

West Sussex

Wiltshire.

Crimestoppers Trust

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a grant to the Crimestoppers Trust; and if he will make a statement. [135098]

Mr. Charles Clarke: For 2000–01 the Home Office made a grant of £90,000 to Crimestoppers for their administration costs. I have also agreed to fund an evaluation of the effectiveness of Crimestoppers' work in London.

Police Officers (Medical Retirement)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers subject to disciplinary proceedings have retired on medical grounds in each of the last three years. [134541]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not available centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Prison Education Funding

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on proposed changes to the funding of prison education; if it is his policy to devolve funding to the Department of Education and Employment; if it is his policy to ring-fence prison education funding *(a)* overall and *(b)* in each individual prison budget; and what the proposed time-scale is for the changes. [134676]

Mr. Boateng: A joint Prison Service and Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) partnership will be established to build on the policy framework for prison education. The plan is for funding for prison education to be transferred to DfEE from April 2001. It will be ring-fenced but detailed arrangements have yet to be finalised.

Accountability for management control and responsibility for delivery will remain with the Director General of the Prison Service. It is envisaged that close working between the Prison Service and DfEE will be beneficial for prisoners.

There will be a joint Ministerial announcement early in 2001 which will set out the details of the partnership and funding arrangements.

Practising Freemasons

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce restrictions upon practising freemasons in *(a)* the police, *(b)* the judiciary and *(c)* his Department. [135916]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government have introduced voluntary registration of freemasonry membership in the judiciary and magistracy, the Crown Prosecution Service, the police service, and the prison and probation services. As the response rate to the voluntary registration scheme in the police service was too low to meet the Government's aim of having reasonable public transparency in this area, I am consulting the police service about how a more acceptable response rate can be achieved.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 1 November 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Aston Clinton Bypass

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on *(a)* the date of commencement and *(b)* the date of intended completion of construction of the Aston Clinton Bypass. [134416]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Tim Matthews, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. John Bercow, dated 1 November 2000:

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the A41 Aston Clinton Bypass.

The procurement process for this scheme is due to end on 21 December and, subject to its satisfactory completion, we aim to award the contract before the end of March 2001.

The contract will be let on the basis of Design and Build and, because the contractor will need time to complete the detailed design, the main construction work is not expected to start until June/July 2001, although some advance work may take place beforehand. We anticipate that the road will be open to traffic by March/April 2003.

If you need any further information, please contact the project manager for this scheme, Andy Finch, in our Dorking office. His telephone number is 01306–878342.

Dog Identification Working Group

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he plans to publish the minutes of evidence of the Dog Identification Working Group; and if he will list the groups and organisations which gave evidence to the group in respect of the use of implanted microchips. [134358]

Mr. Hill: The report of the Dog Identification Group contains copies of the minutes of the meetings and the evidence they considered. I will make an announcement soon with regard to the publication of the report. The following groups and organisations were represented on the Dog Identification Group and others are indicated where they provided separate evidence.

Members

The Blue Cross

Chartered Institute for Environmental Health (CIEH)

The Dogs' Home Battersea

The Kennel Club

Local Government Association (LGA)

National Canine Defence League (NCDL)

National Dog Wardens Association (NDWA)

Pet Care Trust (PCT)

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)

Wood Green Animal Shelters

Observers

Animal Health Trust (AHT)

Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)

Other Government Departments (MAFF, Home Office, Scotland Office, National Assembly for Wales, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Region, Northern Ireland Office)

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)

Other evidence provided by:

Bradford Metropolitan District Council

Bristol City Council

British Dalmatian Club

British Small Animal Veterinary Association

N Cardwell (Senior Dog Warden Belfast)

The Association of British Dogs' Homes.

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to receive the report of the Dog Identification Working Group; when he plans to respond to that report; and if he plans to publish the report and his responses thereto. [134363]

Mr. Hill: I met the Dog Identification Group on 6 September where they formally presented me with their report. I agreed to consider the group's recommendations and at this stage I am minded to consult interested bodies on the content of the report and to place a copy on the Department's website. I will make a further announcement soon on the next course of action.

Rail Safety

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his most recent estimate of the number of defective rails requiring urgent attention by Railtrack for safety reasons in each regional train operator's franchise and in total. [134895]

Mr. Hill: On Friday 27 October there were 276 sites where Railtrack engineers were checking for evidence of gauge corner cracking, the fault which is believed to have caused the accident at Hatfield.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what rules govern regular consultation and exchange of information and opinion between representatives of train crews and representatives of train operators, Railtrack and other agencies related to safe operation of railways; how often such meetings take place; what reports are made to him concerning such deliberations; and if he will review such rules. [135448]

Mr. Hill: The current legal requirements relating to worker consultation in relation to train crews are set out in: the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974; the European "Framework" Directive 89/391/EEC; the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977; the Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996; and the Railways (Safety Case) Regulations 1994. The new Railway (Safety Case) Regulations 2000, which will come into force on 31 December 2000, will strengthen the arrangements for consultation and communication. The recently mandated confidential incident reporting and analysis system (CIRAS) allows for regular quarterly meetings to discuss and probe particular adverse events. The unions are represented on the Railway Industry Advisory Committee (RIAC) and Railtrack's Safety Advisory Body (SAB). Details of the meetings taking place under these provisions are not normally communicated to the Secretary of State. The Rail Safety Monitoring Group also includes union representation and is responsible for monitoring implementation of the industry's safety commitments announced at the second Rail Safety Summit in November 1999. The Secretary of State is informed of the outcome of these meetings.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will add to the current remit of the Railways and Health and Safety Inspectorates, assessment of potential systems and structures of financing, assisting planning, maintaining, contracting for reward and operating railway services in the United Kingdom in respect of their optimum contributions to safety. [135449]

Mr. Hill: The role of HM Railway Inspectorate, a division of the Health and Safety Executive, is to secure the proper control of risks to the health and safety of employees, passengers and others who might be affected by the operation of Britain's railways. The Health and Safety Executive's remit already extends to considering the implications for health and safety of structural changes within the railway industry and taking action where appropriate to secure the maintenance of health and safety standards. It would not be appropriate to pre-empt the outcome of Lord Cullen's wide-ranging public inquiry into railway safety by proposing major changes to the Executive's functions at the present time.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people on passenger trains were killed in railway accidents in each of the last three years. [135100]

Mr. Hill: The number of people on passenger trains killed in railway accidents is shown in the following table produced by the Health and Safety Executive's HM Railway Inspectorate.

Category	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*Total*
Passenger	14	6	33	53
Railway Staff	0	0	2	2
Total	14	6	35	55

Comprehensive data on railway safety can be found in HM Chief Inspector of Railways Annual Reports on Railway Safety in Great Britain, copies of which can be found in both House Libraries.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the allocation of resources to regional development agencies will be determined by the recently published Index of Multiple Deprivation. [134567]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The RDAs' existing programmes will largely continue in 2001–02. The proposed new arrangements for allocating the physical regeneration budget include use of the Indices of Deprivation 2000 and the agreed transitional arrangements. No other RDA programme uses the indices.

The method for allocating funds to RDAs under the new single programme from April 2002 has not been decided. A variety of indicators and indices are likely to play a part.

Trunk Roads

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will publish the criteria used for recommending the detrunking of a road; [134413]

(2) if he will publish the criteria for including a road in the trunk route network. [134412]

Mr. Hill: The trunk road network was created by and defined in the Trunk Roads Act 1936 as the national system of routes for through traffic. The Trunk Roads Act 1946 extended the network. Neither Act specified criteria for including a route in the trunk road network.

The provisions of the 1946 Act, now incorporated as section 10 of the Highways Act 1980, require the Secretary of State to keep the trunk road network under review, and if he is satisfied, after taking into consideration the requirements of local and national planning, including the requirements of agriculture, that it is expedient for the purpose of extending, improving or reorganising the system he may create new trunk roads or remove existing ones by publication of an order under that section of the Act.

During the Roads Review in 1997–98 we undertook a comprehensive review of the existing trunk road network and identified a core network of routes that were of truly national strategic importance today. This core network will remain as the national system of routes for through traffic while the non-core routes that serve only regional or local functions will be detrunked and become the responsibility of local highway authorities. The factors for deciding which routes should be retained in the core network included:

linking the main centres of population and economic activity;

accessing major ports, airports and rail intermodal terminals;

joining peripheral regions to the centre;

providing key cross-border links to Scotland and Wales;

classification as part of the UK Trans-European Road Network.

They were published in our integrated transport White Paper "A New Deal for Transport" (Cm 3950) published in July 1998.

Fitness to Drive

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will

seek information from his EU transport counterparts on restrictions on driving vehicles by people with insulin-treated diabetes. [135398]

Mr. Hill: The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has written to all EU counterparts. To date replies have been received from Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Spain and Germany. Information has also been obtained from Norway.

In the light of this information, the Secretary of State's honorary advisory medical panel on diabetes and driving has reconsidered its previous advice and recommended that applicants with good diabetic control and no significant complications may apply for C1 entitlement (vehicles of between 3.5 to 7.5 tonnes). The panel will meet again on 8 November to finalise the details, after which public consultation will begin with a view to having the legislative changes in place by spring 2001.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the ban on driving of Group II vehicles by insulin-using diabetics. [135496]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* At their meeting on 4 October, the Secretary of State's honorary medical advisory panel on driving and diabetes reviewed the licensing arrangements for Group 2 vehicles (vehicles above 3.5 tonnes). They agreed that those with good diabetic control and no significant complications should be allowed to apply for a licence for category C1 vehicles (between 3.5 and 7.5 tonnes). They will meet again on 8 November to finalise the details, after which public consultation will begin with a view to having the legislative changes in place by spring 2001.

Housing Green Paper (Wales)

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements he has made to take account of specific Welsh needs when drawing up his Bill on the proposals in the housing Green Paper. [135116]

Mr. Mullin: My Department maintains regular contact with the National Assembly for Wales, both at official and ministerial level, about taking forward the proposals in our housing Green Paper. My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning also hopes to meet the new Assembly Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities in the near future. Responses to the Green Paper, and consultation with the National Assembly, will inform the framing of any proposed legislation. We will be announcing the outcome of the Green Paper consultation before the end of the year.

Single Regeneration Budget

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those single regeneration budget bids which *(a)* were not successful in SRB Round 6 and *(b)* did not receive their funding bid in full. [134847]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* There were 258 final bids received under round 6 of the single regeneration budget and 189 of these were awarded SRB funding. The unsuccessful bids are given in list A. Successful bids that received reduced funding are listed in table B. All SRB bidders were required to prioritise the different elements of their bid to show what would be suitable at reduced levels of funding.

List A—Name of Unsuccessful SRB Round 6 Final Bid

East of England

Tendring "ACCESS"

Inclusion through Communication in Hertfordshire

Norwich "Catton and Fiddlewood"

King's Lynn and The Fens

East Midlands

Rural action zone—South Holland

London

Leyton Links East London

Linking Economic Potential to Social Exclusion

Building Capacity of DETR Regeneration Partnerships within London/Linkage to National Network of Regeneration Partnerships

Pathways South Paddington

Bridging the Digital Divide

Regeneration East London through Youth

Including Edmonton

CELEC—Enhancing Work Opportunities in the Healthcare Industry

Access to Sustainable Employment Barking—South Ilford

Airport Supply Chain Programme (ASCP)

Supporting Southwark Education

A Leadership Centre for London—Raising Educational Standards in the Capital

MERG—Unity in Diversity

Building Better Business

Mind the Gap—Steps Towards Social Exclusion

Getting London Working Extension

The London Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Capacity Building Programme

New Jobs and Investment for West London

Sustainable Communities in a Changing Landscape

Black Gold Marketing

Keeping and Creating Jobs and Investment for South London

The London E-business Bid

Steps to Employability Programme

Economic Development, Raising Skills and Regeneration through Effective education Business Links

Wandlevalley.com

Learning through Enterprise

Employability and Enterprise—Capital Communities

North East

Regional Community Fire Safety Project

North East Corporate Community Investment Programme

Upper Teesdale Doing Well For Itself

Regional Media Development

North West

Partnership North West—All Communities Together Now

Salford—A Future for Liverpool Road, Eccles

Ellesmere Port—Link Up Move Up

Business Link Merseyside—Enterprising Merseyside

South East of England

Life in Milton Keynes and North Bucks County Towns

Agenda For Youth

Kent and East Sussex Architecture Centre

South West

Tomorrows Torbay

Community Action For Rural Devon

Getting Sutton Working (Plymouth)

Weymouth and Portland—Unlocking the Potential

Rural Youth Linx (Regionwide)

Regeneration of Ethnic Minority Communities (Regionwide)

Piecing IT Together: SWettlers Project (Regionwide)

West Midlands

Push for Regeneration

Neighbourhood Matters in Coventry

Kington—Redefining the Market Town

Netherton and Woodside—All our Futures

Investing to Regenerate for the Black Country

Skills Expansion Programme—Sep

WM Green Business Parks

Creating New Working Communities Through Innovation in Coventry and Warwickshire

Coalfield Communities Partnership

The Sentinel Project

Employment Creation—Phase 2—Hereford and Worcestershire

Yorkshire and the Humber

Leeds Community Social Entrepreneurs

Positive Action for Ethnic Businesses

Communities Regeneration Through People

Regeneration of Ethnic Minority Communities Programme

Centre for Regeneration Excellence

South Yorkshire Seedcorn Loan Fund

South Yorkshire Community Investment Fund

Leeds Micro Loan Finance

Yorkshire Finance to Business

Table B

£000

Name of SRB round 6 final bid with reduced funding	*SRB total sought*	*SRB total announced*
East of England		
Oxmoor Opportunities	1,647	1,483
East Midland		
Positioned for prosperity -moving forward—Coalfields	17,000	15,100
Including local communities—Nottingham (GNP)	9,000	8,800
Normanton regeneration—Derby	7,000	6,800
Greater Humberstone—Leicester	8,000	7,800
Promoting growth—Lincoln	2,578	2,348
Regeneration in Buxton and the Peaks	3,000	2,700
Making the Links—North West Leicestershire	922	800
Connecting Northamptonshire Communities	2,000	1,800
Bridging Communities—Leicestershire rural	2,005	1,500
Bridging the gap—Boston	1,316	1,216
New start Netherfield—Nottingham	973	50
Loughborough outreach	999	50
Erewash valley—Amber valley	1,000	50
London		
From Hardcore Homeless	8,818	6,000
Changing Places, London Lives	10,750	8,063
Urban Renaissance in Lewisham	17,729	15,900
More London Bridge—More Opportunities for Residents and Employees/ers	17,900	15,210
New Beginnings New Settlements	5,989	5,000
Health Benefits Regeneration	12,000	9,000
Delivering London's Manufacturing Offer in Thames Gateway South	12,000	10,800
Enterprise for Communities	3,414	1,500
Communities in Business: Poplar and Leaside	23,000	20,700
Digital Learning Ring: The Next Generation	5,873	5,300
All Change @ Camden Central	13,860	7,000
The Art of Regeneration	2,842	2,500
Renewal: Turning Adversity into Opportunity for Refugees and Recent Arrivals in West London	6,500	6,000
The Jobs Opportunities Programme	1,000	900
Putting New Heart into Grahame Park	2,595	2,500
Raising Our Sights: New Ambitions for Young People in Lambeth	10,763	6,000
The Circle Initiative	5,145	4,631
Prosperity and Pride for Peckham	3,000	1,500
Park Royal Connect	14,955	6,955
Centre of Expertise for Manufacturing	7,000	6,300
A Model for Best Practice: Joined Up Regeneration in the Thames Gateway	480	200
The London Civic Forum—Reconnecting London	306	150
Opportunity into Reality: A New Waterloo	24,918	19,005
The Grid for Creative London	9,395	2,000
Community Courthouse Initiative	6,000	200
Community Involvement Across the London Region	1,572	190
Access to Excellence for Newham's Communities	25,000	18,750
Manufacturing Investment and Workforce Development in Barking and Dagenham, Havering and Thurrock	12,500	10,000

Table B

£000

Name of SRB round 6 final bid with reduced funding	*SRB total sought*	*SRB total announced*
Keep London Working	9,529	4,500
London South Central Connections	25,000	20,000
The Thames Gateway London Remade Programme: Re-engineering Secondary Materials	7,925	5,400
North East		
Promoting strong, Healthy and Safe communities in Co. Durham	22,000	20,000
Gateshead—A New Future	12,000	10,800
Middlesbrough—Accelerating the Renaissance	20,000	10,000
Redcar and Cleveland—Pathways to Inclusion	10,500	7,875
North Hartlepool—Headland Revival	10,330	7,725
Newcastle—Going for Growth	9,996	7,497
North West		
Hyndburn—People of Accrington and Church Together	12,091	8,000
Pendle—The Time is Now for Nelson	15,250	12,000
Wigan—Worsley Mesnes Community Gains	15,250	8,250
Cumbria Rural Partnership—Distinctly Cumbrian	4,000	150
South East of England		
North Kent Forward	280	240
Swanley—People First	728	650
Herne Bay and Whitstable Coastal Regeneration Programme	1,134	1,000
Dover Urban Regeneration Programme	2,261	2,000
Thanet Horizons	13,000	10,000
East Kent Strategic Area Framework	158	50
Pooling Our Resources: A Culture of Inclusion for Eastbourne	7,443	5,000
Promoting Social Inclusion in Brighton and Hove	6,956	5,000
Coastal Renaissance in East Sussex	250	200
Hastings and St. Leonards—A Sea Change	10,989	10,000
Ryde 2000	6,514	6,250
Turning the Tide: A Bright Coastal Future	6,995	6,950
Southampton Community Futures	25,764	15,000
Thames Valley Social Enterprise	1,771	1,770
PRREDASI—Promoting Regional Race Equality	300	100
Able to do Business	2,497	100
Medway Innovation Centre	2,420	300
South West		
Wontford Regeneration Partnership (Exeter)	992	40
Regeneration of South Western Bridport (Dorset)	1,995	50
Bath Communities Improving Together	2,000	50
Bid for Sutton Ward (Plymouth)	11,200	8,400
Bringing Glastonbury Together	951	713
Communities First in Rural Somerset (Phase II)	1,607	1,200
Bringing Bristol Together	9,900	8,350
Weston-super-Mare: Together	2,950	2,360
West Midlands		
NW Birmingham Corridors of Regeneration	44,363	39,963
Sandwell Learning Plus	30,000	22,500
Regenerating the Social Economy in the West Midlands	11,750	3,525
Burton—Investing in Inclusion	8,700	6,525
SPARKS	3,539	3,185
South Warwickshire PIE	4,001	3,000
Hereford in Touch	4,946	3,709
Making a Difference in North Staffordshire	7,942	5,004
Improving Access to Effective Services in Telford	2,590	1,943
Yorkshire and the Humber		
Netherthorpe and Upperthorpe—Sheffield	6,500	5,000
South Yorkshire Black Forum	1,200	600
South Yorkshire Coalfield	90,000	80,000
Regen. Halifax 2000	16,176	12,100
Hull City Vision	33,300	28,300
Humber Works	4,300	3,500
Spirit of Staithes Regeneration Initiative	1,800	1,083

Train Drivers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what previous rail service, or experience, is required by recruits as trainee drivers *(a)* in respect of any rail employment and *(b)* as drivers of yard, suburban and freight train movement in respect of the high speed train services operated by the Great Western and Great North Eastern Railway. [135404]

Mr. Hill: Previous rail service or experience is not a requirement for trainee drivers. First Great Western and Great North Eastern Railway are required to comply with Railtrack Group Standard GP/RT3251. This standard requires train operating companies to ensure that any person authorised to drive a train is assessed and certified as medically fit.

High-speed Trains

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will state, in respect of the high-speed train sets currently operated by the Great North Eastern Railway, which organisations are responsible for their design, construction, commissioning and testing; who owns the sets; who leases them; who maintains them; who crews them; and who is responsible for other functions formerly carried out by the British Railways Board in relation to those sets. [135403]

Mr. Hill: Great Northern Eastern Railway's (GNER) fleet of vehicles are owned by, and leased from, two different rolling stock leasing companies (ROSCOs), Angel Train Contracts Ltd. and Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. These vehicles were designed, manufactured, commissioned and tested by British Rail before privatisation. Heavy maintenance of the fleet is the responsibility of the ROSCO while light maintenance and crewing is the responsibility of GNER.

Public Transport Subsidy

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was spent per head of population by each local authority in England on public transport subsidy for each of the last five years for which figures are available. [135096]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The figures requested have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Advisory Committee on Consumer Products and the Environment

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response he has made to the first report of his Advisory Committee on Consumer Products and the Environment. [135438]

Mr. Meacher: The Government welcome the first report of the Advisory Committee on Consumer Products and the Environment. It contains a number of positive recommendations on how we can reduce the impacts products make on the environment.

I met the Committee Chair, Dr. Alan Knight, last month and indicated to him that we will be considering carefully all the Committee's recommendations for action. We are already looking at how those relating to graded labels for cars and homes, standards for government procurement, and the development of a consumer website to help environmental choice, could be put into practice. I will be writing to Dr. Knight to keep him informed of progress on the recommendations.

Local Government

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provisions have been made and guidance issued allowing referendums on elected mayors to take place on the same day as local elections. [135075]

Ms Armstrong *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* As I told the House on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 173–74W, we have now published guidance on new council constitutions for English local authorities, in which is stated our intention to make regulations under the Local Government Act 2000 which would allow referendums on elected mayors to take place on the same day as any ordinary local election, and to require such polls to be combined.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given to local authorities on determining the validity of petitions requiring a referendum on introducing an elected mayor. [135076]

Ms Armstrong *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* As I told the House on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 173–74W, we have now published guidance on new council constitutions for English local authorities, which includes guidance on determining the validity of petitions in accordance with the provisions of the Local Authorities (Referendums) (Petitions and Directions) (England) Regulations 2000 (SI 2000/2852). To make this determination a local authority must, in particular, satisfy itself that the petition includes the names, addresses and signatures of at least 5 per cent. of the local government electors for its area.

Clothing and Textiles

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect on the clothing and textiles sector of the withdrawal of compulsory competitive tendering in the public sector. [135563]

Ms Beverley Hughes: None. There is no obvious connection between the local authority activities that were subject to competitive tendering and the health of the clothing and textile sector. The new duty of best value, which applies from 1 April 2000, will encourage the development of new markets in the provision of local authority services.

Improved Vehicles

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many vehicles were impounded because their owners failed to buy a road fund licence; and how many were crushed in each year since 1995. [135910]

Mr. Hill: The wheelclamping scheme for vehicle excise duty evasion was introduced in August 1997. The following information relates to that scheme:

Year	*Impounded*	*Crushed*
1997	557	163
1998	4,838	3,663
1999	10,718	8,369
2000[1]	11,962	10,205

[1] To date

Liquified Petroleum Gas

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to extend the arrangements for conversion of vehicles from petrol or diesel to liquified petroleum gas to older vehicles. [135739]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The Powershift programme sponsored by my Department provides grants only towards the cost of converting vehicles that are under one year old to run on liquefied petroleum gas. Through Powershift we are trying to encourage vehicle manufacturers to produce production-line gas vehicles rather than the after-market conversions that currently dominate the market. Not only will production-line vehicles be much cheaper than after-market conversions, their emissions performance should also be better. Therefore, Powershift grants are targeted at new vehicles to ensure manufacturers develop the high performance systems and technologies needed to manufacture gas vehicles on the production line.

However my Department also sponsors a Cleaner Vehicles Programme that aims to reduce emissions from existing vehicles operating in urban areas. The programme includes targeted projects to fit emission reduction technologies and to convert older vehicles to run on alternative fuels, including LPG, where it proves cost effective and environmentally beneficial to do so.

GM Crops

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what efforts he is making to prevent the criminal damage of genetically-manipulated crops. [133659]

Mr. Meacher: Acts of vandalism or violence against those involved in evaluations of legally grown GM plants are totally unacceptable. The police have powers under public order legislation to deal with those who commit such acts and this has not changed. In a democratic society there is no reason for people to resort to violence against others or their property and it is right that the police use their powers to prevent this happening.

We are continuing to explore our options for protecting the property and families of farmers participating in the farm scale evaluations, with them, the industry and the police. We are looking at how we can best secure sites, which by their very nature are difficult to protect. We have, however, consistently promised to have a science-led, open and transparent regulatory environment and this means letting people know about the sites notified to us.

Rural White Paper

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures his Department will take to co-ordinate Government policy for rural areas following publication of the Rural White Paper. [133658]

Mr. Meacher: The Cabinet Committee on Rural Affairs already has the remit of co-ordinating the Government's policies affecting rural areas. Its tasks include looking at the policies of all Departments so as to ensure that they take account of their impact on rural areas and that they work as effectively as they can together to support rural life. The Rural White Paper will include our assessment of what more needs to be done to ensure that the rural dimension of each Department's policies is clearly identified and integrated across all Departments.

Concrete Flues

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a further statement on the safety of concrete flues in dwellings. [136427]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Last year the Government were made aware of concerns about the safety of certain flue liners which are intended for use in chimneys serving appliances burning solid fuel. The Minister for Housing and Planning made an announcement about this on 24 February 1999. To resolve these concerns my Department commissioned a risk analysis, and has considered with experts what may need to be done about existing houses and what amendments might be necessary to improve the Building Regulations approved guidance. This report was published today, and can be viewed on the DETR Website at www.construction.detr.gov.uk/br/br06.htm

The Department's risk analyst contractor CRE Group Ltd. has been unable to show conclusively that the concerns over additional danger are well founded. As well as this, neither my Department nor the two principal housing warranty providers are aware of any fatal or other accidents that have arisen as a result of the failure of the sorts of concrete flue liners whose safety has been questioned. On the evidence that the experts have produced it therefore seems reasonable to believe that householders are unlikely to be exposed to additional dangers if they apply common sense in following combustion appliance manufacturers' advice on routine maintenance and chimney sweeping.

There remain some doubts however about the durability of poorer quality, cheaper varieties of concrete flue liners, and owners of dwellings built since about 1990 with concrete flue liners may be faced with the need for repairs or replacements sooner than they might have expected. This should not be a risk to safety unless householders fail to carry out the proper maintenance and sweeping previously mentioned.

Whilst not finding clear evidence of additional risks, CRE Group Ltd, has made a number of useful recommendations regarding the safety of flues in general. They include improvement of the performance standards given in the Building Regulations, improving the competence of those engaged in building, maintaining and sweeping chimneys, remaining alert to the possibility of clusters of flue failures, and reminding those householders

who burn solid fuel as their main heating source that proper appliance maintenance and chimney sweeping are essential. Most of the recommendations are accepted in principle, and my Department will be working with the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, the DTI, and with the fuel suppliers, chimney component manufacturers and chimney engineers and sweeps to implement them as soon as practical by:

incorporating new guidance into the Building Regulations. A new edition of the relevant Building Regulations Approved Document should be published next year and I am pleased to see that some manufacturers of concrete flue blocks have already adopted the new overall performance standards that we intend to propose in the Approved Document.

continuing to promote both the Quality Mark and the proposals to recognise Competent Persons in the Building Regulations as ways of encouraging builders, oil and solid fuel heating engineers, chimney engineers and sweeps to improve the competence of their people. Changes in the guidance mentioned above will also encourage greater competence in ensuring the safe accommodation of combustion installations.

collaborating with the Department of Trade and Industry and the Home Office to ensure that local authorities and fire brigades are fully briefed on the hazards associated with combustion installations in buildings, the risks of householders' exposure to them, and what they can do to remind householders about how to protect themselves. A new tool kit for this purpose was launched on 12 October by my hon. Friend, the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs.

working with appropriate trade associations to ensure appliance manufacturers and solid fuel suppliers and their retail outlets provide satisfactory safe operating and maintenance advice to their customers.

working with appropriate trade associations to ensure that chimney engineers and sweeps are aware of the possible additional risks associated with concrete chimney liners, and to watch out for the possibility that individual failures may be an indication that other flues in the neighbourhood may be at risk. I have asked to be kept informed about such clusters.

most importantly, working with the above organisations and others to make sure that our leaflet on the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning from solid fuel and oil heating appliances is made available to the sectors of the community that earlier research has shown to be most at risk. The leaflet advises on the dangers that can arise in normal use of solid fuel and oil heating appliances and prudent maintenance and sweeping measures that prevent them from occurring.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

E-commerce

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the cost to businesses of the EU agreement on e-commerce jurisdiction in favour of powers of courts of a consumer's country of residence; and if he will make a statement. [135565]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My Department has made a provisional Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) on the consumer provisions of the European Commission's proposal for a Community Regulation on jurisdiction and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters (the "Brussels Regulation").

Compared to Article 13 of the existing 1968 Brussels Convention, the Commission proposal broadened the scope for consumers to take legal action in their home country when in dispute with traders in other EU member states. The RIA suggests that the risk of being sued by a consumer in another member state is small, but that the Commission proposal could lead to a slight increase in legal expenses insurance premiums for those traders who take out such insurance.

The Government opposed the part of the Commission proposal (Recital 13) that would have meant that firms maintaining internet websites would automatically have been at risk of being sued in other EU jurisdictions. The Commission's amended proposal which has just been received omits that recital. Discussions between member states in the Council working group last week suggest that the amended Commission proposal is likely to form the basis of the final agreement on the consumer provisions of the draft Regulation. My Department will prepare a revised RIA. Our provisional assessment is that in comparison with the existing Article 13, the final text is unlikely to impose substantial additional costs on traders.

Post Offices

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ask the Post Office Users' National Council to reconsider the guidelines for consultation by the Post Office on the closure of main offices with a view to requiring such consultation before any commercial contracts are agreed. [134508]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand that the Post Office Users' National Council and the Post Office are in the process of reviewing and revising the Code of Practice on post office closures, including the consultation procedures, to see how the code might be improved and strengthened.

Airbus A3XX

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what is the expected percentage real return for the Department of Trade and Industry on the launch aid which has been provided for the Airbus A3XX; [135853]

(2) what is the total value of repayments to the Department of Trade and Industry which fall due under contractual conditions on the Airbus A3XX grant aid package. [135856]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Conditions in the A3XX launch investment contract, as with all other launch investments, remain commercially confidential.

Launch investment is a risk and revenue sharing Government investment in the design and development of specific civil aerospace projects in the UK. The investment is not a grant and is repayable at a real rate of return, usually via levies on sales of the product developed.

Multiple Deprivation Index

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if his Department uses the Index of Multiple Deprivation in the allocation of funds. [134574]

Mr. Alan Johnson: No. In 1999, the Government, co-ordinated by the Department of Trade and Industry, used ward information from the previous 1998 Index of Local Deprivation in England and its Scottish and Welsh

equivalents to help identify areas covered by the urban strand of Objective 2 of the European Structural Funds for the period 2000–06. No similar decisions have occurred since publication of the new Indices of Deprivation 2000.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tanzania

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many *(a)* external consultants and *(b)* departmental officials her Department employed in Tanzania between 1997 and 2000–01; and if she will list which projects they have worked on. [135217]

Mr. Foulkes: Between 1997 and 2000–01 this Department has directly employed more than 230 external consultants from many different countries, including as many as possible locally, on over 300 assignments to contribute to our programme in Tanzania and has increased the number of our staff in country from 14 to 26. We have also contributed resources to joint Government of Tanzania/multi-donor projects that employ local consultants. All projects in the Tanzania programme have benefited from consultancy inputs.

Tourism Challenge Fund

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Tourism Challenge Fund; and if she will list the countries which are taking part. [135113]

Mr. Foulkes: The Tourism Challenge Fund was launched at the beginning of this year and the first projects were selected in July. At present, we are finalising contractual arrangements with the successful bidders. It is too early to determine the effectiveness of the Fund as the selected projects have not yet been established. Moreover, as we are still in the process of completing the Fund's first full bidding cycle, it is also too early to evaluate policy and procedures. We intend to review the Fund's performance in the fourth quarter of 2001.

The projects selected in the first bidding round are located in Namibia, The Gambia and Indonesia.

Press Releases

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many press releases were issued by her Department, its agencies and non-departmental bodies in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 2000 to date; and how many of them have been made available on the Department's website. [135157]

Mr. Foulkes: This Department issued 82 press releases in 1999, and has issued 37 press releases so far in 2000. They are available on the Department's website.

Departmental Website

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many staff her Department employs to maintain her Department's website; how frequently each topic area within the website is updated; what expenditure has been incurred by her Department in the operation of the website in 1999–2000; and what the average number of hits on the site was in each of the last six months. [135156]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development has one internet manager maintaining its website. The various topic areas within the website are updated regularly, where appropriate on a daily basis. The total expenditure incurred in the operation of the website for 1999–2000 was £13,257. The average number of hits on the website for the last six months are as follows: May—38,670, June—38,081, July—39,800, August—40,199, September 37,933, October—46,863.

DEFENCE

Trigat Weapon Programme

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received from the UK's partners in *(a)* the Trigat Medium Range Anti-Tank guided weapon programme and *(b)* other joint programmes in which the UK is a partner about the UK's withdrawal from the Trigat programme; and if he will make a statement. [134345]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 1 November 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence concerning the Trigat Medium Range Anti-Tank guided weapon programme. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The Ministry of Defence has received no representations from our former partners in the medium range TRIGAT programme, or from any partners on other joint programmes, about the UK's withdrawal from the programme, since this was announced on 28 July this year. The Integrated Project Team in the Defence Procurement Agency is maintaining a working level dialogue with its colleagues in other countries.

Hunter-killer Submarines

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many nuclear hunter-killer submarines will be berthed in Devonport at a single time *(a)* awaiting rectification work and *(b)* while rectification work is being carried out; [135757]

(2) how many hunter-killer submarines he estimates will be berthed in Devonport in order to carry out rectification work to prevent leakages in their cooling systems; [135756]

(3) what estimate he has made of the likely duration of rectification work being carried out on hunter-killer submarines in Devonport. [135752]

Mr. Spellar: The full inspection programme for nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines will not be completed until mid-November. The results of the

inspections will then need to be analysed and a rectification programme developed for those submarines that require repair. For these reasons, it is impossible at this stage to estimate how long the repair programme at Devonport will take, or the number of submarines that will be under repair or awaiting repair there at any one time. I can confirm, however, that each repair is expected to take some months, but that it should be possible to work on more than one submarine at a time. In addition to Devonport, repairs could be undertaken at HM Naval Base Clyde.

Roll On/Roll Off Vessels

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he plans to make an announcement about the contract for roll on/roll off vessels for his Department. [135662]

Mr. Hoon: I announced on 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 413–14, that subject to final negotiations, we intend to sign a 25-year private finance initiative contract with AWSR Shipping Ltd., based in the UK, for the strategic sealift service. This will deliver the requirement of six roll on/roll off ferries identified in the Strategic Defence Review. Two of the ships for this service will be built by Harland and Wolff, securing 400–600 jobs in Northern Ireland, and four will be built in the Flensburger shipyard. As part of this contract, the ships will be fully crewed by British merchant mariners when they are in Ministry of Defence use. The contract is worth around £950 million (based on expected usage of the ships), of which we expect that about 85 per cent. will be spent in the United Kingdom.

Naval Exercises

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the availability of live ammunition for use in naval exercises. [134930]

Mr. Spellar: Live ammunition is available for use by HM ships in naval exercises. Each individual ship has an annual practice allowance, some of which may be used during exercises. The quantity used in naval exercises is determined by a range of factors such as operational and training priorities and the most cost-effective balance between live and simulated firings.

The specific allocation of ammunition is withheld in accordance with exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, which relates to defence, security and international relations.

Nuclear Armaments

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the proportion of total defence spending which is to be spent on nuclear armaments. [135389]

Mr. Spellar: In the last financial year, 1999–2000, expenditure on the nuclear warhead programme totalled £391 million—that is, approximately 1.75 per cent. of net defence expenditure for the year.

Luce Bay Range

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress being made in regard to the sea bed containment of cluster bombs dropped by his Department in Luce bay. [135117]

Mr. Spellar: Work on the sea bed containment of the cluster bombs released in Luce bay began on 31 August 2000. The manufacture of the RENO mattresses at the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) range at West Freugh is now complete. The frames to which the mattresses will be attached have been delivered and tested. The associated equipment, including a barge and crane, required for the deployment of these mattresses is in place. Two of the 12 locations of the cluster bombs have been successfully covered and work on the containment of a third site has commenced. Progress, however, has been hampered in recent weeks by severe weather conditions. To complete the work a two-week period of good weather conditions is required.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what type of projectiles have been *(a)* fired and *(b)* dropped at the Luce Bay (Torrs Warren) range in the last 12 months; and if the (i) firings and (ii) bombings were at hard targets. [135833]

Mr. Spellar: During the last five years, a variety of stores, both inert and live, have been released and/or fired on the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) range at West Freugh which comprises the sea danger area of Luce Bay and the land target area of Torrs Warren. Bombs, rockets and missiles have been released over Luce Bay where most of the trials activities take place. Fixed and rotary wing machine guns of various calibres are also fired. Bombs are also released on the land target area and fixed and rotary wing machine guns of various calibres fired. Missiles are fired from the land out into the bay. Hard targets are normally perceived to be bunkers and vehicles such as tanks. There are no such targets at DERA West Freugh. There are, however, barges in the bay which are used for inert store releases and three large concrete areas on the land. Any live stores released on to either the concrete or the surrounding softer land are cleared by explosive ordnance demolition techniques as part of DERA's good housekeeping.

Oil Deliveries

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contingency plans he has for using service drivers to deliver oil to other than essential service providers. [135943]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Contingency planning is in hand to provide military drivers if required to deliver fuel to essential service providers. Definitions of essential services, and decisions on who should receive fuel, are not a matter for the Ministry of Defence.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what powers he has to direct service drivers to drive oil tankers owned by private contractors or oil companies. [135942]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The Emergency Powers Act 1964 empowers the Defence Council to authorise the employment of the armed forces on urgent work of national importance. The provision of tankers is a matter for the oil companies and other Government Departments.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service drivers are being trained to drive oil tankers. [135941]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Around 900 drivers are expected to have been trained by mid-November. These are in addition to the drivers, numbering nearly 200, who are already qualified and able to provide assistance if required.

Sierra Leone

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many UK forces are *(a)* deployed in Sierra Leone and *(b)* about to be deployed; from which parts of the armed forces they have come; and what their mission and rules of engagement are. [135921]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The total number of troops deployed on the ground in Sierra Leone will vary, depending on the training under way, but it will be somewhat over 400, compared with the 300 prior to the announcement on 10 October 2000.

The personnel are drawn from all three services and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service.

The UK forces in Sierra Leone are employed in a training and advisory capacity, not to participate directly in combat operations. They are, however, issued with robust rules of engagement to allow them to defend themselves if necessary.

HEALTH

AIDS Awareness

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the work of his Department in promoting awareness of AIDS and how to avoid contracting it. [134744]

Yvette Cooper: In the absence of a cure for AIDS or a vaccine against HIV, prevention remains our best weapon in the fight against the spread of HIV. We therefore remain committed to funding health promotion work, including awareness campaigns for groups most at risk of HIV and the general population. £3 million has been allocated to sexual health promotion work for 2000–01 including HIV/AIDS health promotion. The Department also funds the National AIDS Helpline health promotion. The Department also funds the National AIDS Helpline which provides confidential advice and information on all aspects of HIV and AIDS.

Resuscitation Policies

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department issues to *(a)* social services departments, *(b)* care home providers and *(c)* providers of care in non-residential settings concerning the development and application of resuscitation policies; and how compliance with such guidance is monitored. [134842]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* Resuscitation decisions are among the most sensitive decisions that clinicians, patients and parents may have to make. Decisions whether to resuscitate patients is primarily a clinical matter for the doctor responsible for the treatment of the patient concerned. Whenever possible, the doctor should involve the patient in the decision-making, and when appropriate, their relatives or carers.

When making resuscitation decisions the doctor should have regard to guidance on resuscitation decision-making issued by a professional and recognised body of medical opinion.

On 5 September, the Department issued a Health Service Circular Resuscitation Policy (HSC2000/28) to National Health Service trust chief executives—copied to chairs of public health groups—which makes clear that patients' rights are central to decision-making on resuscitation.

It is not the responsibility of social services departments, care home providers, nor providers of care in non-residential settings, to make decisions concerning resuscitation.

In circumstances where persons in their care may have collapsed and are in need of medical attention, local procedures should have been developed which set out arrangements to deal appropriately with such cases. This protocol should be available and understood by all staff involved.

Children in Care

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the average amount spent per child in care by each local authority in England on the placement of children in residential care for each of the last five years for which figures are available. [135097]

Mr. Hutton: Information on reported gross expenditure per child per week on the placement of children in residential care by local authorities is contained in the Department's key indicator graphical system. Indicator PAFB9 provides information for 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 but is not available for earlier years. It refers to children placed in community homes. Indicator UC74 provides information for 1998–99 and earlier years on a slightly different basis as it also includes placements in secure units; it is not yet available for 1999–2000. Tables for both indicators have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children were placed in residential care homes by each local authority in England in the last five years for which figures are available. [135105]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is given in the table.

Number of children looked after by local authorities who were placed in residential children's homes at 31 March, 1995 to 2000, England

	Residential children's homes				
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
England	6,600	6,400	6,200	6,300	6,500
North East					
Shire counties					
Durham	74	74	67	55	72
Northumberland	58	47	45	39	41
Unitary authorities					
Darlington	30	33	25	17	14
Hartlepool	9	7	2	1	3
Middlesbrough	34	27	18	17	19
Redcar and Cleveland	30	22	24	15	11
Stockton on Tees	21	23	16	25	33
Metropolitan districts					
Gateshead	73	57	64	48	48
Newcastle upon Tyne	56	63	59	64	61
North Tyneside	18	22	21	18	22
South Tyneside	53	50	58	52	44
Sunderland	73	71	61	70	70
North West					
Shire counties					
Cheshire	35	38	48	47	39
Cumbria	38	34	42	29	33
Lancashire	285	296	291	301	274
Unitary authorities					
Blackburn and Darwen	55	49	70	50	46
Blackpool	47	41	38	31	30
Halton	2	4	6	5	6
Warrington	9	12	13	13	12
Metropolitan districts					
Bolton	47	38	39	27	29
Bury	26	25	24	28	30
Manchester	92	110	82	92	95
Oldham	37	33	42	42	53
Rochdale	31	34	31	41	25
Salford	37	46	51	60	94
Stockport	71	72	56	70	51
Tameside	28	30	31	21	23
Trafford	40	45	32	47	35
Wigan	33	34	39	41	41
Merseyside metropolitan districts					
Knowsley	16	23	20	16	19
Liverpool	184	187	203	191	203
Sefton	59	47	41	49	44
St. Helens	41	37	45	36	42
Wirral	49	39	33	30	28
Yorkshire and Humberside					
Shire counties					
North Yorkshire	22	16	26	29	24
Unitary authorities					
East Riding Yorkshire	14	23	48	36	36
Kingston upon Hull	92	103	113	103	103
North East Lincolnshire	38	33	29	29	32
North Lincolnshire	44	43	27	37	28
York	23	21	14	18	17
Metropolitan districts					
Barnsley	59	77	58	57	57
Bradford	44	54	45	90	99
Calderdale	48	53	48	40	37
Doncaster	43	48	58	53	65
Kirklees	86	69	41	57	48
Leeds	159	166	153	165	163
Rotherham	45	42	37	33	41
Sheffield	67	75	76	75	101
Wakefield	41	44	30	34	37
East Midlands					
Shire counties					
Derbyshire	35	38	41	40	35
Leicestershire	18	18	16	23	28
Lincolnshire	65	60	53	60	55
Northamptonshire	96	76	69	79	80
Nottinghamshire	31	34	34	38	40
Unitary authorities					
Derby	37	52	39	35	48
Leicester	26	23	37	37	43
Nottingham	83	66	58	75	66
Rutland	1	2	1	0	0
West Midlands					
Shire counties					
Shropshire	14	18	20	24	19
Staffordshire	99	88	44	49	65
Warwickshire	14	20	22	17	16
Worcestershire	37	30	36	40	52
Unitary authorities					
Herefordshire	4	10	3	10	11
Stoke-on-Trent	53	45	55	55	28
Telford and Wrekin	32	25	20	24	31
Metropolitan districts					
Birmingham	272	259	305	284	280
Coventry	15	23	50	33	39
Dudley	40	36	40	34	33
Sandwell	30	23	39	27	28
Solihull	12	14	16	19	19
Walsall	18	14	17	38	49
Wolverhampton	33	35	25	22	26
South West					
Shire counties					
Cornwall	21	25	43	29	28
Devon	51	40	35	40	32
Dorset	20	20	15	12	17
Gloucestershire	41	42	45	50	38
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0	0	0
Somerset	43	49	53	48	56
Wiltshire	5	10	18	15	17
Unitary authorities					
Bath and North East Somerset	7	3	4	2	4
Bournemouth	19	18	15	14	20
Bristol	87	76	61	60	50
North Somerset	12	2	3	3	1
Plymouth	33	29	18	25	31
Poole	11	14	3	5	8
South Gloucestershire	7	7	12	2	2
Swindon	7	10	8	8	12
Torbay	9	11	9	7	14
London					
Inner London					
Camden	39	37	35	33	49
City of London	1	1	0	0	0
Greenwich	31	41	48	50	43
Hackney	51	51	48	55	52
Hammersmith and Fulham	100	71	54	46	47
Islington	86	102	86	92	133
Kensington and Chelsea	34	29	39	33	28
Lambeth	174	126	95	124	207

Number of children[1] looked after by local authorities who were placed in residential children's homes at 31 March, 1995 to 2000, England

	Residential children's homes[2]				
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Lewisham	41	35	42	56	65
Southwark	48	50	63	53	54
Tower Hamlets	—	—	26	35	—
Wandsworth	57	51	42	39	33
Westminster	69	48	33	34	27
Outer London					
Barking and Dagenham	22	24	13	24	38
Barnet	31	27	22	22	35
Bexley	16	24	15	21	18
Brent	41	28	21	22	21
Bromley	45	39	26	24	22
Croydon	53	45	50	48	53
Ealing	82	63	71	79	68
Enfield	35	35	40	35	27
Haringey	49	31	36	44	62
Harrow	22	25	21	11	21
Havering	36	27	19	19	25
Hillingdon	52	34	54	68	80
Hounslow	44	40	33	35	42
Kingston upon Thames	10	10	3	16	23
Merton	10	9	14	14	13
Newham	61	46	52	43	33
Redbridge	19	14	16	11	15
Richmond upon Thames	15	10	7	8	14
Sutton	7	10	12	9	8
Waltham Forest	33	32	23	26	29
Eastern					
Shire counties					
Bedfordshire	27	29	33	33	33
Cambridgeshire	31	38	35	30	23
Essex	93	91	130	112	123
Hertfordshire	69	78	75	83	72
Norfolk	29	31	67	53	68
Suffolk	43	39	34	47	50
Unitary authorities					
Luton	26	20	18	18	18
Peterborough	24	27	35	19	31
Southend	18	13	26	13	19
Thurrock	5	11	16	13	12
South East					
Shire counties					
Buckinghamshire	37	37	25	27	25
East Sussex	21	23	20	28	19
Hampshire	102	102	93	103	105
Kent	24	29	19	119	101
Oxfordshire	40	41	44	36	31
Surrey	89	86	67	75	80
West Sussex	85	89	80	68	74
Unitary authorities					
Bracknell Forest	13	13	12	13	15
Brighton and Hove	19	25	22	10	11
Isle of Wight	12	8	0	7	9
Medway Towns	15	17	29	25	25
Milton Keynes	28	32	40	21	—
Portsmouth	26	25	31	30	30
Reading	41	44	38	30	22
Slough	38	40	46	22	21
Southampton	25	29	30	14	19
West Berkshire	19	15	13	17	15
Windsor and Maidenhead	26	16	18	15	12
Wokingham	28	26	26	22	13

[1] Figures for children looked after in this table exclude agreed series of short term placements

[2] Includes community homes, voluntary homes, hostels and private registered children's homes

[3] Not available

NHS Dentistry (Christchurch)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many dental practices in the Christchurch constituency accept new NHS patients; and what the number was in March 1997. [135728]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* The situation regarding which dental practices accept new national health service patients can change almost daily. In addition, practices sometimes restrict the category of patients they will accept, such as adult patients exempt from NHS charges or children. March 1997 data are not available, May 1997 data are given instead. The table shows the number of practices accepting all categories or certain categories of new NHS patient in the Christchurch constituency in May 1997 and October 2000.

Number of dental practices accepting new NHS patients in Christchurch constituency

	May 1997	October 2000
Practices accepting all categories of new NHS patients	2	4
Practices accepting certain categories of new NHS patients	4	4
Total number of practices accepting some new NHS patients	6	8

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if an urgent reply will be given to the hon. Member for Walsall, North to his letter of 4 October regarding the need for a constituent to have an operation for a tumour. [135069]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* A reply was sent to my hon. Friend on 30 October.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Fruit Juice Labelling

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the extra costs to the manufacturers of fruit juices in the UK, if the EU proposed directives are introduced; and if he will make a statement. [135045]

Ms Stuart: I have been asked to reply.

United Kingdom industry has made estimates of one-off relabelling costs of up to £7 million. A more accurate assessment will be made during the period of consultation associated with the drafting of UK regulations to implement the Directive.

Maize

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress is being made on the decision whether to add Chardon LL maize to the National List. [136382]

Mr. Nick Brown: We proposed the addition of Chardon LL to the UK National List in March. After objections to the proposal were raised, Mr. Alun Alesbury

was appointed by Ministers to hear representations in relation to the proposed listing, and a hearing is currently underway.

The Government have now learned from the French authorities that the data from French trials on varietal distinctness, uniformity and stability (DUS), which supported the Chardon application for National Listing in the UK, were based on one year's data from accredited breeders' trials and one year's data from Government-run trials. This is apparently one of the procedures allowed by the French authorities for DUS trials of new maize varieties. The relevant Directive (72/180/EEC) requires two years of official trials.

Ministers are taking urgent legal advice on this issue and the implications of the information for the current hearing. MAFF is seeking further information from the French authorities and consulting the European Commission about the implications for National Listing decisions across the EU.

Chardon LL will only be added to the UK National List if all the legal requirements have been fully met.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his recent meeting with EU agriculture Ministers to discuss further reform of the CAP. [136383]

Mr. Nick Brown: Together with ministerial colleagues from Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, I took part in discussions on the future direction of the common agricultural policy at a meeting on Capri hosted by the Italian Minister of Agricultural Policy, Mr. Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio. These discussions carried forward the fruitful co-operation between Italy, Denmark, Sweden and UK which was a feature of the 1999 Agenda 2000 negotiations on the CAP. The Dutch Minister participated in the meeting for the first time in an observer capacity. Given the challenges of EU enlargement and the WTO trade negotiations to the future of the CAP, the participating Ministers agreed a programme of collective work on reform of the CAP; and decided to meet in a similar format in the course of next year. A copy of the framework document agreed upon at the Capri meeting has been placed in the Library of the House.

Organic Food Standards

Ms Drown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to review the operation of the United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Standards. [136381]

Mr. Morley: As part of the Modernising Government programme, my Department is now beginning a formal review of the United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Standards (UKROFS), which is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Ministry. UKROFS exercises regulatory and supervisory responsibilities in relation to organic farming across the United Kingdom.

The first stage of the review is expected to cover the following issues:

(a) The effectiveness of the present arrangements for discharging the national "competent authority" functions prescribed by Council Regulation (EEC) 2092/91 for regulating organic farming taking full account of Government objectives for modernising public services, particularly the need for continuous improvement and better value for money; Government policy on the regulation of farming, in particular the Strategy for Agriculture, and any parallel policy statements prepared by the devolved administrations; the likely growth in the size and number of businesses in the organic farming sector; the fact that responsibility for agriculture is now devolved to the administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales; and the absence of a clear legal base for UKROFS.

(b) The continuing need for the discretionary functions currently exercised by UKROFS, including setting standards for organic produce, either where there are no EU standards or by supplementing EU standards; directly certifying producers who do not wish to register with the private sector certification bodies; and advising Ministers on organic sector issues, including commissioning R&D.

Because UKROFS is a UK body, the Scottish Executive, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly will be closely involved in the review. We expect to take decisions on the outcome of the first stage of the review before Easter 2001.

Full details of the review, including advice on how to contribute, are being placed in the Library and on my Department's website.

Flax and Hemp

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much has been paid in subsidy to farmers for growing flax and hemp during each of the past five years. [135503]

Ms Quin: The total amount of subsidy paid in the last five UK Exchequer financial years was as follows:

£000

	Flax	*Hemp*
1995–96	10,951	24
1996–97	11,614	621
1997–98	11,796	1,788
1998–99	10,681	1,173
1999–2000	10,011	233

All of the hemp subsidy was paid direct to farmers. For flax there are three payment scenarios. The normal arrangement is for 25 per cent. of the aid to be paid to flax contractors who have concluded cultivation contracts with farmers whereby the farmers renounce ownership of their crop. The remaining 75 per cent. of the aid is paid to processors who have concluded contracts with the contractors.

Under the second method 100 per cent. of the aid is paid to contractors who have the straw processed on their behalf. Under the third method 25 per cent. of the aid is paid direct to farmers who have contracts with processors and the remaining 75 per cent. of the aid is paid to the processor.

Under all three methods, the amount of aid passed on to farmers for growing the flax is dependant on the contractual arrangements they have concluded with either the contractors or the processors.

Bees

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will urgently assess the case for

a trial destruction of bees affected by European foul brood; and if he will offer compensation for beekeepers affected. [135671]

Ms Quin: The Ministry takes very seriously the threat to beekeeping from European foul brood, and is spending around £1.3 million on measures to combat European foul brood and other notifiable diseases. These include the provision of training and education to help beekeepers become more self-reliant through improved bee husbandry, and investigating alternative disease control methods to deal with serious diseases. The National Bee Unit, part of the Central Science Laboratory, with the full co-operation of affected beekeepers is conducting well publicised trials aimed at eliminating persistent European foul brood from apiaries. Preliminary results from these trials are encouraging, especially since the method used avoids the unnecessary destruction of valuable colonies. We consider this to be the best use of the funds available that are being spent in the best interests of the beekeeping industry.

Milk in Schools

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* his ministerial colleagues and *(b)* representatives of the dairy farming sector concerning the policy of promoting milk in schools. [134401]

Ms Quin: School milk is an issue which Ministers discuss from time to time. No representatives of the dairy farming sector have requested a meeting specifically on this subject although I have met and continue to meet other interests which are directly involved.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what due diligence procedures were undertaken by the Millennium Commission prior to the award of each of the additional grants to the New Millennium Experience Company; [134494]

(2) what the value is of lottery funds currently held by the Millennium Commission; and what the maximum value is of the Commission's outstanding financial commitments; [134609]

(3) what the aggregate value is of lottery funds committed but not yet paid over to projects by the Millennium Commission. [134614]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I will write to the hon. Member in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission, and place copies of my replies in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the occasions on which he has issued a ministerial direction order relating to the Millennium Commission since 1 January; and if he will give details of each such order. [134619]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I will write to the hon. Member in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission, and place copies of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he last visited the Dome in his official capacity. [134603]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The last visit I made to the Dome in an official capacity was on 4 July 2000.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money he expects the Millennium Commission to receive from the sale of the Millennium Dome. [134485]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The Millennium Commission grants made to the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) are repayable from any operational surplus or asset disposal, including the sale of the Dome itself, achieved after the organisation has met it other contractual liabilities. Any decision on the division of proceeds from any future sale of the Dome will be made with regard to the way in which the bid is structured and the land which is required, and the need to ensure that the Lottery investment in Greenwich and English Partnerships' contribution is recognised.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what undertakings he has received from the Minister of State, the Cabinet Office regarding further requests for Millennium Commission funds for the Dome. [135414]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* I have received no undertakings from my hon. and noble Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, regarding further requests for Millennium Commission funds for the Dome.

Culture Online Service

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the BBC and other broadcasting companies regarding the establishment of a culture online service. [134491]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* My Department is consulting a wide range of organisations, including the BBC and other broadcasters, as part of the process of developing the proposal for a new service provisionally entitled Culture Online.

Index of Multiple Deprivation

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if his Department uses the Index of Multiple Deprivation in the allocation of funding. [134568]

Mr. Chris Smith: In general terms, the Department allocates funding according to the policy priorities encapsulated in its Public Service Agreement objectives, which include economic regeneration and social inclusion.

Both the Department and its sponsored bodies are planning to use the Index of Multiple Deprivation in relation to certain specific funding programmes. For example, the index will be one of the sources of information used by the Department to determine the location of the Creative Partnerships that will bring new cultural and creative opportunities to schoolchildren in deprived areas. The New Opportunities Fund will also use the index to help determine which local projects should be supported with National Lottery money. Spaces for Sport and the Arts, a capital programme to improve provision in primary schools, financed jointly by the Department, its lottery distributors and the Department for Education and Employment, has used the index as one means of targeting funding on particular local authorities.

Petrol Costs (Ministerial Cars)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the cost was in each of the past three years of petrol for his Department's fleet of ministerial cars; and how many vehicles there are in that fleet. [135036]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport leases four ministerial cars from the Government Car and Despatch Agency. It is that Agency which maintains records of operating costs, including fuel costs, for the vehicles.

BBC Director General

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many meetings with the Director General of the BBC *(a)* he had from the general election until the appointment of Mr. Greg Dyke as Director General and *(b)* he has had since Mr. Dyke's appointment; and on what dates. [134828]

Janet Anderson: This information is available only from 1 January 1998. Since then, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has had the following meetings with Lord Birt and Mr. Dyke:

Lord Birt

13 March 1998
6 April 1998
24 November 1998
6 July 1999
20 July 1999
13 September 1999
4 November 1999
17 November 1999

Mr. Dyke

28 March 2000
6 October 2000.

Free Television Licence

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 25 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 598W, what evidence the BBC has provided to show how money is spent on administering the free television licence scheme. [134772]

Janet Anderson: The BBC has not yet recharged any costs incurred in administering the scheme for free licences for those aged 75 or over, as the Department of Social Security does not have the legal authority to reimburse the BBC until 1 November. It is the intention of the BBC to issue the first invoice to DSS within the next calendar month. All costs recharged will be supported by copy invoices of the charges incurred by the BBC.

KPMG, the BBC's external auditor, will be providing audit reports after the end of this financial year and will express an opinion on the robustness of the costs recharged, based on a sample review of the underlying documents.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many pensioners who are eligible for the concessionary television licence scheme have purchased a short-term television licence and are eligible for a refund on their existing television licence. [134659]

Janet Anderson: Of the 2.78 million applications received by 20 October for free licences in November, 1.06 million people are due a refund on the unexpired portion of their previous television licence. 1.72 million are due no refunds because they purchased a short-term licence, or their licence was due to expire at the end of October, or adjustments were made to their easy payment scheme instalments.

Hotels and Restaurants

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will publish the Government's formal response to the better regulation taskforce's report on "The Impact of Increasing Regulation—a Case Study of Hotels and Restaurants". [135829]

Janet Anderson: The Government's response to the report was published on 26 September. Copies of the response were deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Housing Benefit Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the results from the October 1999-April 2000 Area Benefit Review that assessed Housing Benefit fraud. [135258]

Angela Eagle: The full year's results of non-standard Housing Benefit measurement for the period October 1999 to September 2000 are expected to be available in the summer 2001.

SERPS

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many new claimants of SERPS have been awarded SERPS *(a)* as soon as they became eligible, *(b)* less than two weeks after they became eligible, *(c)* two to four weeks after they became eligible, *(d)* four to six weeks after they became eligible and *(e)* more than six weeks after they became eligible, in each quarter of each of the last two years; [135269]

(2) how many new claimants of SERPS there were in each quarter of each of the last two years. [135268]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 20 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 270–71W, how many people *(a)* were eligible for backdated winter fuel payments for (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999, *(b)* have contacted the winter fuel payments helpline in each month since it began, *(c)* have made a claim for backdated winter fuel payments, *(d)* received a backdated winter fuel payment before the end of September and *(e)* have still to receive a backdated winter fuel payment. [134783]

Angela Eagle: It is estimated that around a total of 1.9 million people could be eligible for payments in respect of previous winters. This includes men aged 60–64 and men and women over State Pension age who did not qualify for a Winter Fuel Payment before the extension of the scheme because they were not getting one of the qualifying benefits.

The number of estimated to be eligible in each of the three winters of 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is 1.4 million. The difference in the total number eligible and the number eligible in each of the three winters is due to the fact that some people will not be eligible for payments in respect of all three winters, since they were either aged under 60 for some of the period, or turned 65 during the period and will have already received payments for the second or third winter.

The number of calls the helpline has received during each month since it began, the winter of 1997–98, are in the table.

Months	*Number of calls*
Winter of 1997–98 (helpline opened 5 January 1998)	
January	30,347
February	13,046
March	142,536
April	52,094
May	10,447
Winter of 1998–99 (helpline opened 5 October 1998)	
October	6,561
November	13,206
December	10,233
January	49,338
February	32,455
March	8,237
April	592
Winter of 1999–2000 (helpline opened 13 September 1999)	
September	7,897
October	6,733
November	43,616
December	122,078
January	91,790
February	31,430
Helpline from April 2000	
April	31,502
May	84,336
June	122,265
July	112,263
August	82,905
September	136,812
October	[1]105,820

[1] Up to 20 October 2000

To date, the number of claims received in respect of Winter Fuel Payments for past winters is 999,490.

The number of payments issued, in respect of past winters, before the end of September is 855,354. To date that number has increased to 936,240.

The number of claims outstanding to date are: 32,272 claims already been processed but awaiting issue; 20,707 claims returned to the customer seeking further information; 21,690 claims returned but not yet processed.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which bodies he has consulted to ensure that the forthcoming stakeholder advertising campaign does not lead to mis-selling or mis-buying of pensions. [134644]

Mr. Rooker: The forthcoming advertising campaign aims to communicate basic impartial information about pensions, and to explain the range of pensions options available, including stakeholder pensions, so that people can make informed decisions about their pensions arrangements.

Consultation on the stakeholder pension guides for individuals, and employers included the FSA Pensions Education Forum, which includes members from the pension industry, employer representatives and other Government Departments.

Lone Parents

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library a copy of the written information handed to lone parents who join the New Deal for Lone Parents. [134546]

Angela Eagle: The documents have been placed in the Library.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

School Closures

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the number of school closures by constituency in each of the last five years. [135222]

Ms Estelle Morris: The numbers notified to my Department are contained in tables, which have been placed in the Libraries.

Teachers (Assaults)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance his Department gives on measures teachers can take to defend themselves if attacked by pupils. [135035]

Ms Estelle Morris: DFEE Circular 10/98 makes it clear that teachers may use reasonable force to control or restrain pupils to prevent them from causing injury to themselves or others, and contains guidance on appropriate physical intervention measures. The guidance emphasises that the degree of force used must be in proportion to the circumstances of the incident and be the minimum needed to achieve the desired result.

We intend to issue additional guidance to help schools and local education authorities plan their strategies for managing the behaviour of pupils with severe behavioural difficulties. Placing the use of restraint in its proper context as one element only of a school's behaviour policy, the guidance will include advice on drawing up and agreeing policies on its use, selecting appropriate training and recording and monitoring incidents.

Overseas Teachers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the proportion of teaching posts occupied by teachers from overseas in *(a)* London and *(b)* England and Wales in the current academic year. [134346]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Index of Multiple Deprivation

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if his Department uses the Index of Multiple Deprivation in the allocation of funds. [134575]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Index of Multiple Deprivation is used by the Department to help to identify areas which are to be invited to develop a Sure Start Programme. The index will also be used in the allocation of Nursery Education Grant for three-year-olds in 2001–02.

New Deal for Young People

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many candidates have completed New Deal for Young People in the West Sussex employment area; and how many of these *(a)* have taken up unsubsidised employment and *(b)* are still in unsubsidised employment; [134625]

(2) how many recruits to the New Deal for Young People have not completed that scheme in West Sussex in each of the last three years. [134627]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The New Deal aims to help unemployed people move as quickly as possible from welfare into unsubsidised work. The support that is given continues if the young person returns to JSA. The New Deal programme is not a fixed-length course which allows you to pinpoint when a client's participation in the programme is 'complete'.

In West Sussex Coastal Plain unit of delivery, the latest figures to August 2000 show 957 young people have started New Deal, and we know that of the 802 who have left, 421 have gained unsubsidised jobs. Of these, 317 are sustained unsubsidised jobs. We use the term 'sustained job' for those young people not returning to Jobseekers Allowance within 13 weeks of gaining a job.

Many other young people leave the New Deal programme for jobs without informing the Employment Service or maintaining any further contact. These additional jobs do not enter the official statistics.

School Discipline Policies

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with teachers who have been physically assaulted by pupils about school discipline policies. [134685]

Jacqui Smith: We discuss such issues regularly as we meet representatives of the teacher associations about discipline and other issues. As a result of representations from headteachers, we recently issued new guidance for exclusion appeal panels indicates that the headteacher's decision to exclude should not be overridden in a range of circumstances including where there is violence or the threat of violence.

Student Debt and Loans

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average level of student debt is after a three year course in higher education. [134686]

Mr. Wicks: The average debt of a borrower with a mortgage-style student loan entering repayment at the start of the financial year 1999–2000, the latest date for which data are available, was £3,210.

Information on private sector debt such as overdrafts and other commercial loans is not available centrally.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received about the student loan repayment administration regulations. [134723]

Mr. Wicks: The regulations governing the repayment of student loans through the tax system from April 2000 were subject to wide consultation. We received a number of helpful suggestions from employer representatives about new arrangements, which are aligned closely to the administration of tax and national insurance. We have announced that we will conduct a review of the impact of the regulations on small businesses in July 2001 and we plan to conduct a full evaluation of the scheme in 2003.

School Leavers (Gap Year)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of school leavers take a gap year before entering higher education; and what the figure was in 1997–98. [134687]

Mr. Wicks: The latest available information is given in the following table. The figures cover those students with two or more A levels who gain a place on a full-time undergraduate course via the University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) and then defer entry for a year. Students who defer their application to UCAS because they are taking a gap year are therefore excluded.

Accepted applicants with two or more A levels via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)

	Year for which applicants were accepted for entry	
	Autumn 1997	*Autumn 1999*
All accepted applicants with two or more A levels	183,123	183,852
of which:		
proportion deferring entry for a year	8.0	8.8

Commercial Sponsorship (Higher Education)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to increase commercial sponsorship in higher education. [134710]

Mr. Wicks: Higher education institutions generate funding from a variety of commercial sources including sponsorship, donations, fees for provision of education and training, contract research and other services. They do so without prejudice to their public funding, while the Higher Education Reach-Out to Business and the Community fund encourages more and closer relationships between industry and higher education. In addition some commercial organisations offer financial support to students in the form of sponsorship. From September 2001 the Government will raise to £4,000 the amount of bursary income that a student may receive from a sponsor before any deduction is made in the level of financial support for which they may be eligible.

Teachers (Drug Use)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what disciplinary action his Department advises should be taken against teachers who are found to have used illegal drugs. [134716]

Ms Estelle Morris: We take a very serious view of all cases in which teachers are convicted of offences involving illegal drugs, but under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, as with previous legislation under the previous administration, it is for governing bodies of schools to decide how to exercise their disciplinary powers in particular cases of misconduct. They must treat each case on its merits. In our experience employers also take these cases very seriously, however, and a teacher who is convicted of an offence involving illegal drugs will almost invariably be dismissed. Such cases are also reported to my Department so that the Secretary of State can consider exercising his powers under the Education (Restriction of Employment) Regulations 2000 to bar the person from further employment as a teacher, or other work involving regular contact with children or young people in the education service.

Sexual Relationships

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance is issued to schools about the approach towards sexual relationships between pupils aged *(a)* under 16 years and *(b)* 16 years or above. [134718]

Jacqui Smith: Sexual relationships involving children under 16 are a criminal offence. Our recently published Sex and Relationship Education guidance sets out the procedure teachers should follow if they become aware that a child under the age of 16 is having, or contemplating having, sex. Our guidance also explains the benefits of and the reasons for young people delaying sexual activity, and this is backed up by our campaign to reduce teenage pregnancies.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his Department's policy is towards sexual relationships discovered between teaching staff and schoolchildren aged 16 years or above. [134938]

Ms Estelle Morris: A sexual relationship between a teacher and a pupil is a very grave breach of trust regardless of whether the pupil is aged 16 or above. It is regarded as misconduct, and is grounds for disciplinary action, including dismissal, by employers. Such cases are also reported to my Department so that the Secretary of State can consider exercising his powers under the Education (Restriction of Employment) Regulations 2000 to bar the person from further employment as a teacher, or other work involving regular contact with children or young people in the education service.

Under the proposals in the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill, it would become a criminal offence for a person aged 18 or over who is looking after children under 18 receiving full-time education at an educational institution to engage in any sexual activity with a child receiving such education at that institution. The Bill is currently before the House of Lords.

Performance Management Visits (North-west Schools)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools in the north-west have successfully used the DfEE website to book a performance management visit; and what percentage of the total number of schools in the north-west this constitutes. [134769]

Ms Estelle Morris: As of 25 October 2000, 60 schools in the north-west region have accessed the Department's website to book a performance management visit. This constitutes almost 2 per cent. of all schools in the north-west. Nationally, however, usage currently averages 9 per cent., representing a range from almost 2 per cent. up to 20 per cent. of schools in other regions using the website to book performance management visits.

Schools can book performance management visits online or using paper forms. Such bookings started property in September 2000. It is too early to draw conclusions about take-up of the online process.

Foundation Degrees

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for foundation degrees. [134795]

Mr. Wicks: The core features of foundation degrees were set out in a prospectus issued by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in July. These features will ensure that the foundation degree becomes a valued vocational HE qualification that meets employers' needs. The prospectus also invited bids from consortia of higher education institutions, further education colleges and employers, to design and develop the prototype foundation degree programmes.

HEFCE received proposals from 56 consortia, many including more than one higher education institution, by the 11 October deadline. This represents almost two-thirds of institutions with degree awarding powers drawn from across the higher education sector. We welcome this enthusiastic response and clear commitment to foundation degrees. The successful consortia will be announced in late November.

Teacher Numbers

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many full-time and part-time teachers are currently employed by each education authority. [134902]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of qualified regular teachers in the maintained sector of each local authority are shown in the following table.

January 2000

Local authority	*Full-time*	*Part-time (headcount)*	*Part-time (fte)*	*Total (fte)*
City of London	10	10	—	20
Camden	1,150	330	140	1,290
Greenwich	1,800	460	220	2,020
Hackney	1,370	200	100	1,470
Hammersmith and Fulham	860	200	110	970
Islington	1,210	220	130	1,340
Kensington and Chelsea	560	120	60	610
Lambeth	1,370	390	200	1,570
Lewisham	1,630	490	240	1,870
Southwark	1,600	260	110	1,720
Tower Hamlets	1,880	350	220	2,100
Wandsworth	1,470	360	170	1,640
City of Westminster	1,040	170	90	1,130
Barking and Dagenham	1,380	110	60	1,430
Barnet	2,320	650	330	2,660
Bexley	1,780	240	130	1,910
Brent	1,930	300	140	2,070
Bromley	2,140	390	180	2,320
Croydon	2,440	700	400	2,840
Ealing	2,040	320	150	2,200
Enfield	2,390	430	300	2,700
Haringey	1,690	230	130	1,820
Harrow	1,170	470	190	1,360
Havering	1,690	270	160	1,850
Hillingdon	1,950	310	150	2,100
Hounslow	1,770	280	150	1,920
Kingston upon Thames	930	240	120	1,050
Merton	1,010	220	110	1,120
Newham	2,230	140	80	2,310
Redbridge	1,990	310	160	2,140
Richmond upon Thames	850	380	170	1,020
Sutton	1,320	290	150	1,470
Waltham Forest	1,870	270	140	2,010
Birmingham	9,200	1,220	610	9,820
Coventry	2,540	430	230	2,770
Dudley	2,560	270	140	2,710
Sandwell	2,490	350	180	2,670
Solihull	1,760	300	160	1,920
Walsall	2,130	360	210	2,340
Wolverhampton	2,100	270	130	2,230
Knowsley	1,580	120	60	1,640
Liverpool	3,930	300	170	4,100
St. Helens	1,510	110	50	1,560
Sefton	2,380	290	140	2,520
Wirral	2,790	340	180	2,960
Bolton	2,380	210	100	2,480
Bury	1,390	160	80	1,470
Manchester	3,500	350	200	3,690
Oldham	2,100	230	110	2,210
Rochdale	1,770	200	100	1,870
Salford	1,900	60	30	1,930
Stockport	2,040	340	170	2,210
Tameside	1,860	170	100	1,950
Trafford	1,800	230	110	1,900
Wigan	2,550	250	130	2,680
Barnsley	1,590	90	50	1,630
Doncaster	2,510	300	150	2,660
Rotherham	2,240	240	130	2,370
Sheffield	3,510	880	460	3,970
Bradford	4,250	750	330	4,580
Calderdale	1,680	230	120	1,800
Kirklees	3,040	500	250	3,290
Leeds	5,730	670	360	6,090
Wakefield	2,510	160	70	2,580

January 2000

Local authority	*Full-time*	*Part-time (headcount)*	*Part-time (fte)*	*Total (fte)*
Gateshead	1,550	160	70	1,620
Newcastle upon Tyne	2,010	250	110	2,120
North Tyneside	1,490	200	100	1,600
South Tyneside	1,260	110	40	1,310
Sunderland	2,530	150	80	2,610
Isles of Scilly	20	10	—	20
Bath and North East Somerset	1,210	290	140	1,350
City of Bristol	2,410	640	270	2,680
North Somerset	1,240	230	120	1,360
South Gloucestershire	1,860	430	230	2,090
Hartlepool	790	50	30	820
Middlesbrough	1,230	110	60	1,290
Redcar and Cleveland	1,230	140	60	1,290
Stockton on Tees	1,610	190	90	1,700
City of Kingston upon Hull	1,940	210	140	2,080
East Riding of Yorkshire	2,260	420	220	2,490
North East Lincolnshire	1,300	150	70	1,370
North Lincolnshire	1,190	200	90	1,280
North Yorkshire	4,310	1,040	490	4,800
York	1,180	320	160	1,340
Bedfordshire	3,010	560	290	3,290
Luton	1,480	240	120	1,600
Buckinghamshire	3,390	860	490	3,880
Milton Keynes	1,600	250	120	1,730
Derbyshire	5,090	1,050	540	5,640
Derby	1,710	340	150	1,860
Dorset	2,500	550	270	2,770
Poole	930	150	70	1,000
Bournemouth	980	190	110	1,080
Durham	3,980	320	160	4,140
Darlington	760	70	30	790
East Sussex	3,150	810	390	3,540
Brighton and Hove	1,440	390	200	1,640
Hampshire	8,000	1,690	910	8,910
Portsmouth	1,330	170	90	1,410
Southampton	1,500	330	130	1,630
Leicestershire	4,330	1,330	550	4,880
Leicester	2,310	560	260	2,570
Rutland	210	10	—	210
Staffordshire	6,260	940	450	6,710
Stoke-on-Trent	1,810	170	90	1,900
Wiltshire	2,740	680	350	3,080
Swindon	1,370	240	120	1,490
Bracknell Forest	670	150	80	760
Windsor and Maidenhead	870	200	100	970
West Berkshire	1,310	280	130	1,440
Reading	880	250	90	970
Slough	920	170	80	1,000
Wokingham	1,120	330	120	1,240
Cambridgeshire	3,500	750	380	3,890
Peterborough	1,510	190	90	1,600
Cheshire	5,160	860	420	5,580
Halton	1,080	100	60	1,140
Warrington	1,530	230	90	1,620
Devon	4,350	1,380	590	4,940
Plymouth	2,000	320	160	2,160
Torbay	800	220	110	910
Essex	9,490	1,640	740	10,240
Southend on Sea	1,210	220	140	1,350
Thurrock	1,030	120	50	1,080
Herefordshire	1,150	320	140	1,290
Worcestershire	3,830	790	370	4,200
Kent	10,140	2,340	1,020	11,150
Medway	1,940	390	180	2,130
Lancashire	8,930	1,470	760	9,700
Blackburn with Darwen	1,280	180	90	1,380
Blackpool	960	120	60	1,020
Nottinghamshire	5,440	1,040	510	5,940
Nottingham	1,900	330	160	2,060
Shropshire	1,860	340	170	2,030
Telford and Wrekin	1,230	220	110	1,340
Cornwall	3,380	870	320	3,700

January 2000

Local authority	Full-time	Part-time (headcount)	Part-time (fte)	Total (fte)
Cumbria	3,730	910	480	4,210
Gloucestershire	4,010	1,260	600	4,610
Hertfordshire	7,950	1,910	970	8,920
Isle of Wight	970	180	90	1,060
Lincolnshire	4,650	1,270	400	5,050
Norfolk	5,360	980	480	5,840
Northamptonshire	5,060	840	430	5,490
Northumberland	2,320	560	260	2,590
Oxfordshire	4,050	1,060	540	4,590
Somerset	3,150	750	350	3,500
Suffolk	4,880	990	510	5,390
Surrey	6,440	1,560	820	7,260
Warwickshire	3,620	830	420	4,030
West Sussex	4,900	1,480	630	5,520
England	367,150	68,020	33,350	400,500

[ ] Indicates less than five.

Note:

All numbers have been rounded to the nearest 10. Rounded totals may not be the sum of the rounded component parts.

The number of regular teachers in the maintained sector has increased by 6,900 since January 1998.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teaching vacancies there are by subject in each education authority in England. [134904]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of vacancies for qualified classroom teachers in maintained secondary schools by subject and English local authority at January 2000 are contained in the table:

	Mathematics	Information Technology	All Sciences	French	German	Other Languages	French or German	All Languages	English	Drama
City of London	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Camden	5	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Greenwich	2	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Hackney	2	1	5	0	1	0	0	1	1	0
Hammersmith and Fulham	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Islington	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Kensington and Chelsea	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lambeth	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0
Lewisham	3	3	0	2	0	0	0	2	5	0
Southwark	4	0	2	1	0	1	0	1	4	4
Tower Hamlets	6	1	2	0	0	2	1	3	4	2
Wandsworth	5	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Westminster	3	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	3	0
Barking and Dagenham	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Barnet	5	0	2	2	0	0	0	2	2	1
Bexley	4	3	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Brent	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Bromley	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Croydon	5	1	4	0	0	4	0	4	4	0
Ealing	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	3	1	0
Enfield	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	1
Haringey	2	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Harrow	4	0	1	0	0	2	0	2	4	0
Havering	2	0	6	2	0	0	1	3	2	0
Hillingdon	4	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Hounslow	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	2	0	0
Kingston upon Thames	4	2	2	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Merton	4	2	2	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Newham	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	6	0
Redbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Richmond upon Thames	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0
Sutton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Waltham Forest	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Birmingham	4	2	2	2	0	0	0	2	2	0
Coventry	2	0	3	2	1	0	0	3	1	0
Dudley	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Sandwell	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Solihull	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Walsall	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Wolverhampton	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

	Mathematics	Information Technology	All Sciences	French	German	Other Languages	French or German	All Languages	English	Drama
Knowsley	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Liverpool	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
St. Helens	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sefton	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Wirral	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	0
Bolton	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Bury	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Manchester	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oldham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rochdale	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Salford	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Stockport	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Tameside	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Trafford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wigan	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Barnsley	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Doncaster	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rotherham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sheffield	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bradford	1	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Calderdale	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kirklees	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	0
Leeds	4	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wakefield	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gateshead	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newcastle upon Tyne	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	0
North Tyneside	6	1	2	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
South Tyneside	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sunderland	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bath and North East Somerset	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
City of Bristol	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
North Somerset	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
South Gloucestershire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hartlepool	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Middlesbrough	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Redcar and Cleveland	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Stockton on Tees	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
City of Kingston upon Hull	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
East Riding of Yorkshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
North East Lincolnshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
North Lincolnshire	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
North Yorkshire	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
York	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Bedfordshire	4	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	2	0
Luton	3	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Buckinghamshire	4	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Milton Keynes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Derbyshire	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
Derby	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
Dorset	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1
Poole	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bournemouth	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Durham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Darlington	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
East Sussex	3	2	4	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Brighton and Hove	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hampshire	7	3	7	1	0	0	4	5	8	0
Portsmouth	6	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Southampton	1	2	5	0	1	0	1	2	2	1
Leicestershire	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Leicester	1	2	2	0	0	0	2	2	1	1
Rutland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Staffordshire	4	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Stoke-on-Trent	5	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0
Wiltshire	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Swindon	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Bracknell Forest	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Windsor and Maidenhead	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
West Berkshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reading	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Slough	4	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Wokingham	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Cambridgeshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Peterborough	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cheshire	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	3	0

	Mathematics	Information Technology	All Sciences	French	German	Other Languages	French or German	All Languages	English	Drama
Halton	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Warrington	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Devon	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Plymouth	3	2	3	0	0	1	0	1	2	0
Torbay	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Essex	12	3	6	2	1	0	0	3	6	2
Southend on Sea	3	0	3	1	1	1	0	2	0	0
Thurrock	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Herefordshire	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Worcestershire	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Kent	13	1	4	4	0	0	0	4	5	1
Medway	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	2	1	0
Lancashire	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	3	0	0
Blackburn with Darwen	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Blackpool	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Nottinghamshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nottingham	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Shropshire	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Telford and Wrekin	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cornwall	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cumbria	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gloucestershire	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Hertfordshire	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Isle of Wight	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lincolnshire	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Norfolk	3	0	4	0	0	2	0	2	1	0
Northamptonshire	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Northumberland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oxfordshire	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Somerset	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Suffolk	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	2	0
Surrey	7	0	4	1	1	0	2	4	1	0
Warwickshire	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
West Sussex	2	0	1	0	0	0	3	3	2	0
England	233	56	156	42	11	30	26	107	129	233

	History	Social Sciences	Geography	Religious Education	Design and Technology	Commercial and Business Studies	Art, Craft or Design	Music	Physical Education	Other main and combined subjects	Totals
City of London	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Camden	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5	13
Greenwich	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	1	0	1	13
Hackney	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	2	6	22
Hammersmith and Fulham	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	8
Islington	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	0	0	2	11
Kensington and Chelsea	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Lambeth	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	9
Lewisham	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	5	20
Southwark	0	0	1	2	2	0	1	0	1	6	28
Tower Hamlets	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	0	2	25
Wandsworth	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	10
Westminster	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	12
Barking and Dagenham	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	0	9
Barnet	0	0	0	3	2	1	0	0	0	1	19
Bexley	0	2	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	2	16
Brent	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	5
Bromley	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Croydon	0	0	1	0	6	0	1	0	0	2	28
Ealing	0	0	1	0	5	1	1	0	0	3	17
Enfield	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	12
Haringey	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	12
Harrow	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	14
Havering	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	17
Hillingdon	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	1	13
Hounslow	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	5
Kingston upon Thames	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	7
Merton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	13
Newham	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	14
Redbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Richmond upon Thames	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	11
Sutton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Waltham Forest	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
Birmingham	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	18

	History	Social Sciences	Geography	Religious Education	Design and Technology	Commercial and Business Studies	Art, Craft or Design	Music	Physical Education	Other main and combined subjects	Totals
Coventry	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	14
Dudley	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	9
Sandwell	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	8
Solihull	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	6
Walsall	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	6
Wolverhampton	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Knowsley	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	4
Liverpool	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
St. Helens	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sefton	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5
Wirral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	7
Bolton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Bury	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Manchester	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oldham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Rochdale	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Salford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Stockport	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	6
Tameside	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Trafford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wigan	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	9
Barnsley	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Doncaster	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rotherham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sheffield	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bradford	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	17	25
Calderdale	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kirklees	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Leeds	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	10
Wakefield	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Gateshead	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newcastle upon Tyne	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
North Tyneside	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	13
South Tyneside	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Sunderland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bath and North East Somerset	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
City of Bristol	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	4
North Somerset	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	6
South Gloucestershire	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Hartlepool	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Middlesbrough	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Redcar and Cleveland	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	5
Stockton on Tees	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	4
City of Kingston upon Hull	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
East Riding of Yorkshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
North East Lincolnshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
North Lincolnshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
North Yorkshire	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	5
York	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	5
Bedfordshire	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	0	5	19
Luton	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	9
Buckinghamshire	0	0	1	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	14
Milton Keynes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Derbyshire	0	0	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	10
Derby	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	8
Dorset	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	6
Poole	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bournemouth	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Durham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Darlington	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
East Sussex	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	0	14
Brighton and Hove	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
Hampshire	1	0	0	1	8	0	1	3	2	3	49
Portsmouth	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	3	13
Southampton	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	16
Leicestershire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	6
Leicester	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
Rutland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Staffordshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	10
Stoke-on-Trent	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	13
Wiltshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	4
Swindon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
Bracknell Forest	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	5
Windsor and Maidenhead	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	5
West Berkshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reading	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Slough	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	10
Wokingham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Cambridgeshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

	History	Social Sciences	Geography	Religious Education	Design and Technology	Commercial and Business Studies	Art, Craft or Design	Music	Physical Education	Other main and combined subjects	Totals
Peterborough	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cheshire	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	10
Halton	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3
Warrington	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Devon	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	6
Plymouth	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	13
Torbay	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Essex	1	3	0	5	10	5	0	3	4	5	68
Southend on Sea	0	0	1	0	1	4	0	0	2	0	15
Thurrock	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	0	9
Herefordshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
Worcestershire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
Kent	0	0	0	1	4	1	0	2	0	8	44
Medway	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	9
Lancashire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Blackburn with Darwen	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5
Blackpool	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	6
Nottinghamshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nottingham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	5
Shropshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Telford and Wrekin	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
Cornwall	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Cumbria	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gloucestershire	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	4
Hertfordshire	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	7
Isle of Wight	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lincolnshire	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	0	8
Norfolk	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	15
Northamptonshire	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
Northumberland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oxfordshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Somerset	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	4
Suffolk	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	11
Surrey	0	0	1	2	2	0	0	1	0	2	24
Warwickshire	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	6
West Sussex	0	0	0	0	1	9	1	0	0	0	10
England	12	8	25	36	110	17	24	35	30	140	1,141

The number of regular teachers in maintained schools increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

A survey by my department in the first week of September 2000 of maintained secondary schools in England indicated that there were about 1,000 vacancies at all levels of teachers.

Teacher Training

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teacher training course vacancies there are for *(a)* infant, *(b)* junior and *(c)* secondary school courses in each institution offering such courses. [134903]

Ms Estelle Morris: Data on recruitment to initial teacher training courses starting in 2000–01 for each institution in England are not yet available.

Graduates (Unemployment Benefit)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of graduates were claiming unemployment benefit a year after completing their university courses in each of the past five years in England. [134906]

Mr. Wicks: The information is not held centrally. The latest available data on the unemployment rates of newly qualified graduates, which show the position six months after graduation, are given in the table.

Destinations of full-time first degree graduates from higher education institutions in England six months after graduation

Year of graduation	Total graduates with known destination	of which, those who were unemployed[1] Number	Percentage
1994–95	136,455	12,514	9.2
1995–96	145,930	11,784	8.1
1996–97	146,486	10,137	6.9
1997–98	147,888	8,570	5.8
1998–99	152,404	8,426	5.5

[1] The data do not indicate whether these graduates were claiming unemployment benefit or not.

Disabled Students (University Applications)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what initiatives are being pursued by his Department to encourage disabled people to apply for university courses. [134908]

Mr. Wicks: The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is committed to helping institutions to improve and integrate provision for students with disabilities in higher education. The council aims to increase the number of students participating in HE, to improve provision for them, to facilitate the dissemination of good practice and to increase institutional collaboration to ensure that resources are used effectively.

Disabled Students Allowances (DSAs), which help remove barriers to participation, are non-repayable grants available to students in higher education to cover the

additional course-related costs they incur because of their disability. Since 1998 the means test for DSAs has been abolished and the maximum amount available for non-medical helpers has more that doubled to £10,505. This year, we have extended eligibility for DSAs to part-time and postgraduate students.

GCSEs

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of examinees failed the GCSE in each subject in the past three academic years. [134934]

Ms Estelle Morris: The percentages of examinees that failed to achieve a GCSE pass grade (A*-G) in the past three academic years, analysed by subject are:

Percentage

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Biological sciences	0.7	0.6	0.7
Chemistry	0.5	0.4	0.4
Physics	0.6	0.5	0.4
Single science	8.0	7.7	7.8
Double science	2.4	1.8	1.9
Other science	6.1	5.0	5.2
Mathematics	5.0	3.8	3.4
Computer studies	3.7	4.1	3.9
Design and Technology	4.1	3.6	3.6
Information systems	3.6	2.7	3.0
Home economics	5.6	4.7	5.4
Business studies	4.0	4.2	4.6
Geography	2.7	2.9	2.7
History	3.5	3.1	2.9
Economics	4.2	3.8	3.5
Humanities	4.6	4.4	4.2
Social sciences	5.4	5.1	5.0
Physical education	1.1	1.1	0.9
Vocational studies	5.8	5.6	5.7
Art and Design	2.2	2.5	2.2
English	1.0	0.9	1.1
English literature	1.6	1.6	1.7
Drama	1.3	1.2	1.5
Communication studies	2.2	2.8	2.7
French	1.5	1.3	1.7
German	1.3	1.2	1.5
Spanish	2.0	2.2	1.7
Other modern languages	2.2	2.3	2.5
Classical studies	1.8	1.6	2.0
Music	3.1	3.1	3.2
Religious studies	4.4	4.2	4.4
All subjects	2.7	2.4	2.4

Whole-class Teaching

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent assessment he has made of the advantages of whole-class teaching. [135033]

Ms Estelle Morris: Effective whole-class teaching is a key characteristic of high quality teaching in primary schools. Reviews of the research evidence on whole class teaching and other issues were published as part of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. The literacy hour and daily mathematics lesson, which were introduced in September 1998 and 1999 respectively, include substantial elements of whole class teaching in order to maximise the amount of direct teaching that all pupils receive. The Office for Standards in Education has confirmed that these lessons have resulted in "better teaching and better achievement in English and mathematics."

School Inspectors

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many school inspectors there are in each local education authority; and how much is spent by each local education authority to fund school inspectors. [135223]

Ms Estelle Morris: Local education authorities employ staff to work with schools to raise standards. Those staff are generally known as inspectors or advisers. The numbers of local authority employed staff in these categories are not centrally collected. A number of those staff are registered inspectors and team inspectors who also carry out school inspections under contract to Ofsted. Local authorities are required to recover the full costs of those inspections through the contract prices that they agree with Ofsted.

Learning Support Units

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what specialist training is to be given to teachers working in learning support units. [135482]

Jacqui Smith: Most teachers working in learning support units are experienced in classroom teaching and behaviour management. The amount of extra training they need will be determined by the school, drawing on other staff in the school or the local education authority's behaviour support service.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what involvement the young people attending learning support units will have in their operation. [135484]

Jacqui Smith: Young people attending a unit should be consulted and involved in self-monitoring and in setting individual targets for improving their learning and behaviour. Young people should also be consulted about the rewards and sanctions to be imposed while in the unit.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria he will use to judge the effectiveness of individual learning support units. [135486]

Jacqui Smith: We have required each school with a learning support unit in Excellence in Cities areas to have performance indicators and to set targets over a three-year period. Performance indicators include:

reduction in the number and frequency of incidents of poor behaviour or discipline in school for which a punishment is imposed;

improved rates of attendance;

improved educational achievement of pupils in the target group.

We also hope that the availability of the units will reduce the need for exclusions in less severe cases.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment who will be responsible for the management of learning support units. [135485]

Jacqui Smith: The day-to-day running of the learning support unit will be the responsibility of the full-time head of unit, but a member of the school's senior management team should have overall responsibility for the management of the unit.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the expected pupil:teacher ratio is in learning support units. [135488]

Jacqui Smith: Learning support units will be staffed with a full-time head of unit and appropriate support assistance, either full or part-time. There should be between six and not more than 10 pupils in the unit at any one time, either on a full or part-time basis.

Connexions

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure that the Connexions service will deliver *(a)* a universal and *(b)* a differentiated service. [135497]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The Connexions service will provide access for all teenagers to high quality information, advice and guidance about their options in learning and life, and personal support for those who need it. Every teenager is different, and the service can be tailored to individual need. The Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced, on 23 October, a substantial increase in the resources available to deliver the new service. By the end of 2002–03, the funding for the Connexions service will amount to £420 million, which will be £177 million more than the careers service currently receives.

The Government have also issued business planning guidance to the new Connexions partnerships, inviting them to produce plans which identify the needs of all young people in their areas and how they propose to meet them. We will scrutinise these plans to ensure that they are offering a universal service as well as differentiating what is needed for those requiring additional and special help. The new resource and planning guidance will enable Connexions partnerships to deliver a service that meets the needs of all young people, including both those progressing well and those in need of extra help.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to ensure a common approach to the Connexions service *(a)* within his Department and *(b)* between his Department and other Departments. [135498]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The Connexions service will make a major contribution towards the DFEE's objectives to increase participation and attainment in learning throughout the teenage years, thereby providing an effective foundation for lifelong learning. Co-ordinating mechanisms exist to ensure that all the Department's polices for teenagers are developed taking account of the role of the Connexions service. The Connexions service plays a major role in the Government's strategy for support for young people at risk. Coherence between initiatives and policies in this area is overseen by a cross-departmental ministerial group chaired by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. Implementation of the Connexions service is steered by a group of senior officials from all key Departments who meet on a regular basis.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what quality assurance processes his Department will use to maximise the effectiveness of the Connexions programme. [135499]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The Department will ensure that Connexions partnerships deliver high quality and effective services by developing, in consultation with key stakeholders: an agreed set of comprehensive national quality delivery standards, a quality management framework which builds on the most appropriate features of established quality systems and, together with Ofsted, an inspection process which will assure that the standards are met. We will also be promoting the sharing of good practice between Connexions partnerships.

Further Education Contracts

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many lecturers have been employed on regular contracts *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time in further education in each of the last 10 years. [135500]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Data are available only from 1994–95 to 1997–98 and are contained in the table.

Numbers of staff whose primary role is teaching in further education colleges, by mode England 1994–95 to 1997–98

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Number of full-time staff whose primary role is teaching	53,800	52,400	48,800	48,300
Number of part-time staff whose primary role is teaching	77,000	82,200	82,100	79,200
Total number of staff whose primary role is teaching	130,900	134,700	130,900	127,500

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will publish the results of the consultation exercise on a new code of practice for special educational needs and announce his decision thereon. [135501]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Responses received to the recent consultation exercise on the draft revised special educational needs code of practice are intended to inform my Department in finalising the new code, and there is no intention to publish formally the results of consultation prior to seeking Parliament's approval to the final version of the new code for publication next spring. In accordance with the terms of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, individual responses will however be available for inspection from my Department, other than those whose authors have specifically marked them as confidential, by anyone who requests to see them.

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what requirement exists for local education authorities to identify a named person on statements for pupils with special education needs. [135890]

Jacqui Smith: Paragraph 6(b) of Schedule 27 of the Education Act 1996 requires that where an LEA makes a statement of special educational needs they shall, when serving a copy of the statement on the parent of the child, give notice in writing to the parent of the name of the person to whom he may apply for information and advice about the child's special educational needs. Supplementary advice on the identification of the named person is given in the "Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs", which applies to England and Wales.

Grammar School Ballots

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list recorded incidents of fraud and misleading information in respect of the conduct of grammar school ballots before 1 September. [135540]

Ms Estelle Morris: During the school year September 1999 to August 2000, officials investigated 38 complaints about grammar school petitions and ballots as follows: one in Barnet, one in Buckinghamshire, one in Birmingham, 10 in Kent, 14 in Ripon, four in Sutton and seven in Trafford. These included alleged cases of schools and local education authorities spending public funds to influence the outcome of a petition or ballot and alleged breaches of the Ballot Information Code. Only two of these were fully or partially upheld. Both related to Trafford, one from each side of the debate.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many staff are working in his Department on grammar school ballots; and what has been the cost of this team in respect of *(a)* salaries and *(b)* non-staffing costs. [135542]

Ms Estelle Morris: Officials working on the grammar school ballots policy may also be deployed on other duties and it is not therefore possible to give the number or the cost as requested.

Pupil Statistics

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many and what percentage of pupils are *(a)* eligible for free school meals, *(b)* statemented and *(c)* from ethnic minorities in (i) grammar schools and (ii) non-selective schools, in each local education authority with grammar schools. [135541]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the tables.

General information on schools by local educational authority area has recently been published in a Statistical Volume "Statistics of Education—Schools in England 2000", a copy of which is available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed on the Department's statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics.

Maintained Secondary Schools, Selective and Non-Selective: number and percentage of pupils with statement of special educational needs, eligibility for free school meals and ethnicity—January 2000, by parliamentary constituency

	Selective Schools					
	Number of pupils	*Percentage of pupils with statements*	*Number of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals*	*Percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals*	*Number of pupils from ethnic minorities*	*Percentage of pupils from ethnic minorities*
Kent	43	0.1	674	2.4	1,293	4.5
Buckinghamshire	14	0.1	203	1.4	1,829	13.8
Lincolnshire	26	0.2	222	1.9	347	3.0
Birmingham	10	0.2	332	5.1	2,405	36.7
Trafford	—	0.0	318	4.9	627	9.6
Wirral	9	0.1	328	5.4	116	2.1
Medway	12	0.2	218	3.7	484	9.9
Gloucestershire	11	0.2	112	2.1	335	6.3
Sutton	—	0.1	53	1.2	1,041	23.7
Bexley	—	0.1	161	3.8	423	10.0
Lancashire	8	0.2	115	3.0	171	5.8
Southend-on-Sea	—	0.1	104	2.8	266	7.3
Slough	7	0.2	178	5.1	1,792	51.8
Warwickshire	—	0.1	38	1.2	149	5.0
Essex	—	0.0	22	0.7	271	9.2
Torbay	—	0.1	124	4.7	42	1.6
Plymouth	—	0.2	99	3.8	68	2.8
Barnet	—	0.0	34	1.4	765	34.1
Bournemouth	0	0.0	47	2.3	66	3.2
North Yorkshire	0	0.0	30	1.5	58	2.9
Calderdale	5	0.3	36	1.9	107	5.6
Kingston upon Thames	0	0.0	19	1.0	665	35.7
Poole	—	0.1	45	2.4	44	2.4
Bromley	—	0.1	20	1.2	280	16.5
Redbridge	—	0.1	49	2.9	806	48.0
Wiltshire	—	0.1	8	0.5	20	1.2
Reading	—	0.1	5	0.4	207	13.7
Walsall	0	0.0	37	2.7	364	27.0
Enfield	—	0.1	33	2.5	306	26.8
Kirklees	0	0.0	23	2.3	79	8.1
Telford and Wrekin	0	0.0	8	0.9	54	5.6
Liverpool	0	0.0	63	7.5	72	8.5

Maintained Secondary Schools, Selective and Non-Selective: number and percentage of pupils with statement of special educational needs, eligibility for free school meals and ethnicity—January 2000, by parliamentary constituency

Selective Schools

	Number of pupils	*Percentage of pupils with statements*	*Number of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals*	*Percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals*	*Number of pupils from ethnic minorities*	*Percentage of pupils from ethnic minorities*
Cumbria	[1]—	0.1	13	1.7	0	0.0
Devon	[1]—	0.3	15	2.1	9	1.2
Wolverhampton	0	0.0	18	2.6	136	19.4
Stoke-on-Trent	0	0.0	6	1.1	27	5.1
England	181	0.1	3,810	2.7	15,724	11.4

[1] Fewer than five pupils

Non-Selective Schools

	Number of pupils	*Percentage of pupils with statements*	*Number of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals*	*Percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals*	*Number of pupils from ethnic minorities*	*Percentage of pupils from ethnic minorities*
Kent	2,256	3.6	8,915	14.3	1,924	3.2
Buckinghamshire	544	3.0	2,190	11.9	4,469	25.8
Lincolnshire	1,199	3.9	3,519	11.3	311	1.0
Birmingham	1,111	1.8	22,261	36.1	25,774	42.5
Trafford	212	2.3	2,627	29.0	1,039	12.5
Wirral	534	3.0	6,101	34.4	203	1.1
Medway	552	4.1	1,876	13.8	609	4.7
Gloucestershire	817	2.6	2,808	8.8	894	2.8
Sutton	248	2.6	1,125	11.9	730	7.8
Bexley	310	2.5	2,000	16.0	1,220	11.1
Lancashire	2,723	3.9	11,527	16.4	4,863	7.0
Southend-on-Sea	110	1.5	1,455	19.7	269	3.7
Slough	194	4.6	1,073	25.5	2,177	53.1
Warwickshire	753	2.6	2,496	8.6	1,548	5.4
Essex	1,311	1.6	8,803	10.8	1,687	2.2
Torbay	166	2.8	1,161	19.7	58	1.1
Plymouth	342	2.1	2,765	17.2	194	1.4
Barnet	494	2.7	3,320	18.0	6,420	37.8
Bournemouth	222	2.9	1,069	14.0	112	2.1
North Yorkshire	880	2.4	2,671	7.2	360	1.0
Calderdale	370	2.9	2,381	18.7	1,448	11.8
Kingston upon Thames	151	2.3	795	12.1	1,142	17.6
Poole	119	1.9	612	9.9	58	1.0
Bromley	566	3.0	2,461	13.1	1,570	10.0
Redbridge	232	1.4	3,000	17.6	8,166	48.2
Wiltshire	547	2.1	1,804	7.0	358	1.4
Reading	162	3.3	773	15.9	827	17.0
Walsall	544	2.8	3,687	18.7	3,457	17.5
Enfield	378	2.0	4,419	23.6	5,874	32.5
Kirklees	1,073	4.3	4,821	19.1	4,877	20.2
Telford and Wrekin	470	5.2	1,956	21.5	530	6.2
Liverpool	581	1.8	12,288	38.2	1,714	5.4
Cumbria	997	3.1	4,309	13.3	270	0.9
Devon	1,262	3.3	3,694	9.7	294	0.9
Wolverhampton	374	2.4	3,520	22.5	5,092	32.6
Stoke-on-Trent	443	3.2	3,594	25.7	1,060	7.6
England	79,607	2.6	519,820	17.1	347,943	11.9

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each local education authority in England the total number and percentage of out-borough children in secondary schools. [135751]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested on out-borough children in secondary schools is not collected centrally.

Information on pupils attending schools by local education authority area has recently been published in a statistical volume "Statistics of Education—Schools in England 2000" a copy of which is available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed on the Department's statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics.

Dudley Schools

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools in *(a)* Dudley, South and *(b)* Dudley Metropolitan borough have extra teachers as a result of the Government's class size initiative. [135863]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government are well on track to deliver their infant class size pledge. £620 million is available to support the pledge, and allocations to Dudley

LEA so far amount to some £1.75 million. This has enabled the authority to provide additional infant teachers in 24 schools in the borough, of which 10 are to schools in the Dudley, South constituency. It has also enabled the authority to reduce the number of pupils in infant classes of over 30 pupils in September 2000 to 96 (1.1 per cent.), from 739 (7.7 per cent.) in September 1999. The figure in January 1998 was 2,873 (27 per cent.).

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many classroom assistants there are in *(a)* Dudley, South and *(b)* Dudley Metropolitan borough; and what the figure was in May 1997. [135864]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information is shown in the following table.

The number of full-time educational support staff in maintained schools in Dudley, South parliamentary constituency has increased by 27 per cent. since January 1997. In Dudley local education authority area the equivalent percentage increase is 42 per cent. The Government will increase by 20,000 the number of full-time equivalent support staff working in primary and secondary schools in England by 2002.

Information on educational support staff has recently been published in a statistical volume "Statistics of Education—Schools in England 2000" a copy of which is available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed on the Department's statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics.

Full-time equivalent numbers of educational support staff[1] in maintained schools in the parliamentary constituency area of Dudley, South: 1997–2000
Position as at January

	1997	1998	1999	2000
Nursery	5	4	4	1
Primary	89	97	102	124
Secondary	29	31	31	31
Special	20	24	24	27
Pupil Referral units	4	4	4	5
Total	148	160	166	188

[1] Includes both full-time and the full-time equivalent of part-time non-teaching staff

Full-time equivalent numbers of educational support staff[1] in maintained schools in the local education authority area of Dudley Metropolitan borough: 1997–2000
Position as at January

	1997	1998	1999	2000
Nursery	5	4	4	1
Primary	303	357	382	451
Secondary	113	124	127	140
Special	54	64	71	77
Pupil Referral units	4	4	4	5
Total	479	553	589	674

[1] Includes both full-time and the full-time equivalent of part-time non-teaching staff

Specialist Schools

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the moratorium on specialist schools in cases where local education authorities are projected to have reached a level of 30 per cent. of pupils in such schools, with particular reference to its duration and conditions attached. [135924]

Ms Estelle Morris: We want as many pupils as possible to benefit from the network of technology, language, sports and arts colleges around the country and that is why we are expanding the programme to 1,000 schools by 2004. To ensure that all parts of the country, particularly where there are few specialist schools, get a fair distribution of specialist school resources, we do not at present want to receive further applications from schools in local education authorities where 30 per cent. or more of their pupils attend specialist schools. This is not a permanent measure. It will apply only until we achieve a fairer spread of specialist schools in other parts of the country and shall be reviewed after the spring 2001 specialist school competition. We have also said that we shall look sympathetically at exceptional circumstances where a school's application plans are already well advanced and where it has raised the required sponsorship. In two such cases, we have agreed to receive applications from Chenderit and Kingsbrook Schools in Northamptonshire. We will consider these applications in the same way as all other applications received against the published criteria, which include location factors such as distance to the nearest existing specialist school.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many specialist schools have been designated in each year since the inception of the scheme; and what has been the cost to public funds in each of those years. [135936]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of schools designated from each September since the specialist schools programme was introduced and the related cost in each of those years is given in the table:

Year	*Number of designations*	*Financial year*	*Programme cost (£ million)*
1994	49	1994–95	8
1995	58	1995–96	16
1996	74	1996–97	23
1997	78	1997–98	33
1998	85	1998–99	41
1999	77	1999–2000	47
2000	137	2000–01	[1]76

[1] Estimated outturn

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper, or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [136016]

Mr. Wills: DfEE whistleblowing procedures were launched in March 2000. Under these procedures staff are able to report suspected malpractice which breaches the Civil Service Code, legal or ethical standards, and threatens the interests or safety of others (such as staff and the public) and the DFEE itself. They provide a confidential internal channel for raising and dealing with malpractice and offer protection to staff who raise concerns in good faith.

PRIME MINISTER

Single Currency

Q12. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Prime Minister what the wording of the question in any future referendum on the United Kingdom joining the single European currency will be. [133678]

The Prime Minister: The determining factor underpinning any Government decision on membership of the single currency is whether the economic case for the UK joining is clear and unambiguous. Because of the magnitude of the decision, the Government believe that, whenever a decision is taken by Government, it should be put to a referendum of the British people. The question asked in any referendum will need to be considered as part of the legislation providing for the referendum to be held.

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Prime Minister which part of Government is responsible for assessing whether membership of the single European currency would be in Britain's overall economic interest. [135858]

The Prime Minister: The Treasury will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

Wimbledon

Q15. **Mr. Casale:** To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to visit Wimbledon. [133681]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so.

Definition of Superpower and Superstate

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister what his definition is of *(a)* a superpower and *(b)* a superstate, including the (i) differences between them and (ii) their common features. [135009]

The Prime Minister: I said in my speech in Warsaw on 6 October:

> The European Union is the world's biggest single economic and political partnership of democratic states. That represents a huge opportunity for Europe and the peoples of Europe. And as a Union of democracies, it has the capacity to sustain peace in our continent, to deliver unprecedented prosperity and to be a powerful force for democratic values in the rest of the world.

I also said:

> We want a Europe where there are national differences, not national barriers, where we hold many of our policies in common, but keep our distinct, separate identities.

That is what I mean by creating a superpower not a superstate.

Kyoto Mechanisms Office

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the planned level of funding and personnel for the Kyoto Mechanisms Office. [135446]

The Prime Minister: The Government have not yet decided exactly what resources will be needed. This will depend, in part, on how quickly international projects get under way. This will be influenced by the meeting of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (in The Hague in November), which will develop the rules for the Kyoto mechanisms. A final decision will be taken after this meeting.

Waste Resource Action Programme

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on progress made by the new Waste Resource Action Programme. [135430]

The Prime Minister: Significant progress has been made in establishing Waste Resource Action Programme (WRAP) as an independent body with around £30 million of Government funding over the first three years, covering England, Scotland and Wales. Vic Cocker CBE, formerly chief executive of Severn Trent Group plc, is already in place as its chairman. The new chief executive will be Jennie Price, formerly chief executive at the Construction Confederation.

WRAP will be launched formally on 15 November, when its initial priorities and overall objectives for tackling barriers to increased recycling will be published.

Lord Levy

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the visits, and dates of those visits, undertaken by Lord Levy in his capacity as his private envoy since 1 January. [135417]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 6 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 574W. Since then, Lord Levy has made the following visits in his capacity as the Prime Minister's personal envoy:

Israel: 7 August

Palestinian Authority: 8–9 August, 8 October

Syria: 2 May

Jordan: 1 May, 8 August

Egypt: 3 May, 5–6 June, 9–11 August

Switzerland: 29 May (meeting with Amir of Bahrain).

Intelligence and Security Committee (Annual Report)

Mrs. Golding: To ask the Prime Minister when he plans to lay the Intelligence and Security Committee's Annual report before Parliament. [136515]

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the Intelligence and Security Committee for their valuable work and their latest annual report. Following consultation with them over matters which could not be published without prejudicing the discharge of the function and operation of the intelligence and security agencies, I intend to lay the report before Parliament on 2 November. Copies of the report will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Government will respond formally to the report in due course.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what is Her Majesty's Government's latest assessment of the effectiveness of UN sanctions against Iraq; with particular reference to the impact of sanctions on the children of Iraq. [133748]

The Prime Minister: We believe that the sanctions regime has effectively contained Saddam Hussein in the last 10 years. During this time he has not attacked his neighbours, nor used chemical weapons against his own people.

We share concerns that the children of Iraq have suffered greatly, as have all Iraqis, at the hands of a ruthless dictator who cares nothing for their welfare. Unlike Saddam Hussein we are concerned at their plight. SCR1284—a UK initiative—has expanded the oil for food programme. This year alone it will provide more than $16 billion for the Iraqi people. In the face of this oil wealth, there is no reason for the people of Iraq to go short of food and medicine other than Saddam's own decision to deny them humanitarian relief.

Social Inclusion

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Prime Minister what analysis he has commissioned of the effect of the gap between rich and poor on social inclusion. [133662]

The Prime Minister: The Government have taken forward a substantial amount of analysis in this area. The Social Exclusion Unit has, in particular, examined a wide range of research evidence in its work on specific topics such as deprived neighbourhoods and teenage pregnancy. The unit is currently leading work to develop a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. The strategy will aim to arrest the wholesale decline of our most deprived neighbourhoods, to reverse it, and to prevent it from recurring. We expect to publish an action plan later in the autumn, which will set out how we plan to implement the strategy and which includes analysis of the problems in this area.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the progress made by the Lord Chancellor's Department since 1999 in reducing sickness absence; what targets he has agreed with the Cabinet Office; and if he will make a statement. [135466]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department and its agencies, the Court Service and the public Trust Office, together with the Public Record Office, HM Land Registry and the Northern Ireland Court Service have each adopted the principles set out in the "Working Well Together" report, issued by the Cabinet Office in 1998, for managing attendance in the public sector.

As a result, a range of new measures has been introduced with the aim of reducing sick absence levels in line with targets set for 2001 and 2003 and consolidating reductions already achieved. New arrangements include; enhanced local monitoring procedures to capture and interrogate sick absence figures, strategies for dealing with long-term sick absences, the appointment of new occupational health providers, health screening programmes, awareness-raising sessions, and detailed guidance.

The Cabinet Office prepares, each year, an annual report of sickness absence in the civil service, which includes information for each Department. The report for 1999 is currently being finalised and will be published shortly.

Details of the Department's targets for reduced sickness absence for the years 2001 and 2003 against a baseline year of 1998 will be included in its service delivery agreement. This is also to be published shortly.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what procedures exist in the Lord Chancellor's Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper, or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [135453]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department, its agencies, the Court Service and the Public Trust Office, and its sister Departments, the Northern Ireland Court Service, the Public Record Office and the Land Registry each have, or are currently developing, specific procedures for reporting all matters of the nature referred to, in accordance with the requirements of the Civil Service Code.

The procedures within the Lord Chancellor's Department Headquarters, the Court Service Agency and Land Registry provide for staff to address their concerns to a more senior manager, or if this is inappropriate, to a specific named official who will investigate the matter. If staff remain dissatisfied they are advised to report the matter to the Civil Service Commissioners.

The Public Trust Office and the Public Record Office both have existing internal grievance procedures which staff can use if necessary to report the kind of problems covered by the question.

The Northern Ireland Court Service also has an existing internal grievance procedure. However, in response to the Public Interest Disclosure (NI) Order 1998, a suitable policy for dealing specifically with the type of concerns raised in the question is being drafted. It is intended that this policy will be operational by the end of this year.

Visitor's Entry Certificate

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on the introduction of charges to exercise the right of appeal against a refusal of a visitor's entry certificate; what representations he has received about the charges; and if he will list the charges made for other statutory rights of appeal. [135698]

Jane Kennedy: To be of use family visit appeals must be processed swiftly because such visits are often for an important event like a wedding. Providing a priority service is expensive and it is important that visit visa appeals pay for themselves to avoid adverse impact on other high priority areas.

We have received 22 representations from Members of Parliament and one from a Member of the House of Lords expressing concern about the charges for these appeals. In

addition there have been six representations from local Racial Equality Councils and four from other voluntary organisations.

Charges are also payable where there is a statutory right of appeal to the Supreme court, county court and in family proceedings. Details of these fees are set out in the Supreme court, county courts, and Family Proceedings Fees Orders 1999, and subsequent amending orders, respectively. In addition there are charges for applications and hearings at the Lands Tribunal and the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal. These fees are set out in the Lands Tribunal (Fees) Rules 1996 and the Leasehold Valuation Tribunals (Fees) Order 1997 respectively.

Small Claims (Court Fees)

Mr. Field: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the increase in court fees for small claims cases since April 1999. [135670]

Mr. Lock: Issue fees were increased across the board for all litigants issuing money claims on 25 April 2000. The increases varied according to the value of the claim. Since 25 April 2000 a litigant claiming £1,000 or less has paid between £7 and £10 more to issue the claim through the county courts, depending on the size of the claim but, where that claim has been defended, has no longer had to pay the £80 fee payable on the filing of an Allocation Questionnaire. Litigants issuing claims between £1,000 and £5,000 in the county courts, the upper value limit for assigning defended claims to the small claims track, have paid £80 to issue the claim instead of £70, a £10 increase. The Government continue to believe that it is reasonable to expect parties to pay the full cost of the civil justice system they are using to resolve their dispute and to make economic decisions about whether or not to pursue a claim through the courts. Less well-off litigants are protected by exemption and remission provisions.

TREASURY

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, will receive a reply to his letters to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury dated 18 May, 29 June and 2 August. [136090]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have already done so.

Ministerial Directions

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 74W, if he will place supporting documentation and information on ministerial directions since 1990 in the Library; if he will publish the text of each justification given by the Minister for each of these directions; and if he will make a statement. [135451]

Mr. Andrew Smith: This information is not held centrally.

Compliance Costs

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made in the last three months in researching the impact of compliance costs of major taxes and duties. [135874]

Dawn Primarolo: Following an advert in the *Official Journal* of the European Community on 26 May 2000, two contracts were awarded in September 2000 to undertake the first studies in this research programme.

"Our Stake in Our Future"

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place the representations he has received on the consultation document "Our Stake in Our Future" in the Library; and if he will make a statement on progress in the consultation. [135892]

Mr. Timms: I am currently considering this matter in the light of the 30 written responses to the consultation document.

European Investment Bank

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will state the name and qualifications of the representative of the United Kingdom on the Board of the European Investment Bank and the United Kingdom institutions or persons to which he is responsible; what part *(a)* that person and *(b)* Her Majesty's Government plays in the nomination and appointment of the (i) president and (ii) vice-president of that bank; what changes have (A) occurred and (B) are about to occur in that office; and what representations he has received concerning the filling of such vacancies. [134181]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The governing bodies of the European Investment Bank consist of the Board of Governors, Board of Directors and Management Committee, as set out in the Bank's Statute (a Protocol to the EC Treaty). The United Kingdom representative on the Board of Governors is the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The UK members of the Board of Directors are listed in the EIB's Annual Report, a copy of which is in the Library. The UK members are nominated by the Chancellor and appointed by the Board of Governors.

The resident Management Committee of the Bank comprises the President and seven Vice-Presidents. Appointments are made by the Board of Governors on a proposal from the Board of Directors. In order to ensure a balance of Vice-Presidents from different member states the Board of Directors considers for appointment a candidate nominated by the Governor of a particular member state. The candidate nominated is a matter for the Governor concerned.

There have recently been two appointments to Vice-Presidency posts.

IR35

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of IR35 on the Government's efforts *(a)* to encourage more skilled IT workers into the country and *(b)* to tackle social exclusion. [135559]

Dawn Primarolo: The IR35 legislation was necessary to ensure fair taxation of everyone who meets the accepted definition of an employee, whether or not they choose to use a personal service company.

ISAs

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will complete the operational review of ISAs. [135902]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Contributions to the review are being considered and an announcement of the outcome will be made shortly.

Rollover Relief

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish draft clauses relating to rollover relief of substantial shareholdings. [135894]

Miss Melanie Johnson: As was stated in the technical note "Corporation Tax: Chargeable Gains: Deferral Relief for Substantial Shareholdings" published by the Inland Revenue on 23 June 2000, our intention is to publish the draft clauses at the time of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's pre-Budget Report. This will be on 8 November 2000.

COM (2000)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy towards measures outlined in COM (2000) 507; and what changes to UK *(a)* practice and *(b)* law are supported by the Government. [135554]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government will submit an Explanatory Memorandum on the proposal and a Regulatory Impact Assessment in the normal way.

Income Tax

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 1011W, concerning taxation of incomes exceeding £100,000 a year *(a)* what assumptions underlay his estimate of an increase of £200 million per annum for subsequent years and *(b)* when he will next be able to update the information in his answer. [136019]

Dawn Primarolo: As stated in the previous reply, the estimates were based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and are consistent with the economic assumptions at the time of the March 2000 Budget, as published in the "Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report and Financial Statement and Budget Report".

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families are benefiting from the working families tax credit in the Bury, North constituency. [135914]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Estimates of the number of families in each parliamentary constituency in receipt of the Working Families-Tax Credit (WFTC) at the end of May, based on five per cent. sample awards, are shown at Table 9.4 in the WFTC Quarterly Enquiry for May 2000. A copy has been placed in the Library.

Tax Relief (Sports Clubs)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about tax relief and tax exemptions for community and amateur sports clubs; and if he will make a statement. [135646]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), on 31 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 414–15W.

Tour Operator's Margin Scheme

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to complete the review of the Tour Operator's Margin Scheme. [135875]

Dawn Primarolo: There are currently three cases concerning the application of the Tour Operators' Margin Scheme (TOMS) which are waiting to be considered by the VAT & Duties Tribunal or the Court of Appeal. It is therefore appropriate to await the outcome of these cases before deciding upon any substantive changes to the way in which the TOMS is applied.

Online Transactions

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the application of VAT and other taxes to online transactions. [135558]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's views on taxation and electronic commerce were set out in "Electronic Commerce: The UK's Taxation Agenda" published by the Inland Revenue and HM Customs and Excise in November 1999. Copies were placed in the Library at the time of publication.

Self-assessment

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will conclude his review of the self-assessment inquiry procedures; and if he will make a statement. [135900]

Dawn Primarolo: A research study into Income Tax Self-Assessment inquiries has been carried out jointly by the Inland Revenue and the Chartered Institute of Taxation. The results will be published in due course.

Home Care

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will announce the result of the review of the consultation on the liability for supply of home care by commercial supplies. [135891]

Dawn Primarolo: Following Customs' discussions with the home care sector, details of the proposed Extra Statutory Concession on the VAT liability of home care will be available when the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry lays before Parliament revised regulations governing the conduct of the private recruitment industry.

National Insurance Fund

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the balance is of the National Insurance Fund; and what it was 12 months ago. [135115]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to the report by the Government Actuary on the drafts of the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2000 and the Social Security (Contributions) (Re-rating and National Insurance Funds Payments) Order 2000 (Cm 4587).

HOME DEPARTMENT

Animal Experiments

Mrs. Gordon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the arrangements for requiring establishments designated under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 to have an ethical review process. [136224]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have asked the Home Office Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate to carry out a review of the operation of the ethical review process, to see what improvements can be made in the way in which local reviews are carried out to enhance animal welfare. The terms of reference of the review are as follows:

> To review the efficiency and effectiveness of the operation of the Ethical Review Process, as set out in PCD Circular 3–4.98 issued on 1 April 1998, and in particular to consider:
>
> (a) whether the aims of the process, as specified in paragraph 3 of the Annex to the Circular, have been achieved;
>
> (b) what problems may have been encountered; and
>
> (c) what the resource implications have been
>
> and to recommend any changes in the arrangements and to identify best practice.

The review will take account of the views of all the stakeholders in the process, including certificate holders and licensees under the 1986 and animal welfare organisations. The Inspectorate have been asked to report by the middle of 2001.

Mrs. Gordon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consideration he has given to incorporating an independent element in future investigations by the Animal (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate of allegations against establishments and individuals licensed under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. [136225]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have considered the introduction of an independent element into future investigations under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986.

I have concluded that the appointment of a small independent scrutiny team, drawn from the Animal Procedures Committee, and reporting directly to the Secretary of State would be the best and most practicable means of providing assurance that any future Inspectorate investigations have been carried out with the necessary objectivity and thoroughness. I am grateful to the Committee for agreeing to undertake this role following an approach to them in June 2000.

Regulation Tribunal

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements have been made for the appointment of members of the tribunal to be set up under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000; and if he will make a statement. [136380]

Mr. Straw: On 2 October, Her Majesty the Queen appointed eight members to the new Investigatory Powers Tribunal by Letters Patent for a period of five years. Lord Justice Mummery has been appointed as President of the Tribunal and Sir Michael Burton as Vice-President. The remaining six members of the Tribunal are Sheriff Principal John Colin McInnes QC, Sir David Calcutt QC, Sir Richard Gaskell, Mr. Robert Seabrook QC, Mr. Peter Scott QC and Mr. William Carmichael.

Drugs (Confiscation of Profits)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the oral answer of 14 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 924, if he will make a statement on the measures taken to date to implement recommendations contained in the Performance and Innovation Unit report on recovering the proceeds of crime in respect of confiscation of the profits accruing from drug-related crime. [133749]

Mr. Charles Clarke: When the Prime Minister announced the publication of the PIU's Report "Recovering the Proceeds of Crime" on 14 June, he said that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, in collaboration with my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, would take forward implementation of the conclusions of the Report and introduce legislation as soon as possible.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced to the House on 19 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 379, that £54 million had been allocated over the three-year Spending Review period to fund the new National Confiscation Agency.

Legislation to establish the agency and implement other measures proposed in the Report is being prepared and will be brought forward as soon as parliamentary time allows.

In order to inform this work and ensure that no excessive burden will be placed on business we prepared a draft Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) and sent it to a range of organisations, with a request for comments by 31 October. We will make the completed RIA available to the House in due course.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 27 July 2000, if he will explain the reasons underlying his decision not to classify the period of residence of Senator Pinochet in Surrey as an unforeseen burden on Surrey Police, committing them to exceptional additional expenditure and as being an event of international dimension, arising as a consequence of a decision by the Government. [133958]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The total additional costs for protecting Senator Pinochet were estimated at £750,000, which was around 0.8 per cent. of the budget of the Surrey police in 1999–2000. Once account is taken of the special payment of £200,000 made in March 1999 the proportion of the additional costs that fell on the Surrey police was reduced to 0.6 per cent. of the force's 1999–2000 budget.

When the special payment was made in March 1999, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary indicated to the Chief Constable that it was unlikely that he would be able to give Surrey police a further special payment for the additional costs incurred during 1999–2000.

Consideration of the Police Authority's further request for a special grant in March suggested that Surrey police had been able to accommodate the extra costs without a reduction in the level of service provided by the force. During 1999–2000, police numbers in Surrey increased by 123 to 1,785, the highest they have ever been. In view of such favourable indicators it was decided that a further special payment was not justified.

Com (2000) 495

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on his policy towards the establishment of a European registry of sentences passed on criminals and procedures pending, as set out in Com (2000) 495; [134679]

(2) if he will make a statement on his policy towards including *(a)* Eurojust and *(b)* the ECJ in the process of determining claims of jurisdiction between member states in multiple cross-border crimes, as set out in para 13.1 of Com (2000) 495; [134799]

(3) if he will list those proposals on page 22 of Com (2000) 495 which it is his policy to *(a)* support and *(b)* oppose; and if he will make a statement. [134800]

Mrs. Roche: I refer the hon. Member to the Explanatory Memorandum on Com (2000) 495, the Commission's Communication on the mutual recognition of final decisions in criminal matters, which was deposited in the House of Commons Library on 12 October 2000. The Government broadly support the proposals in the Communication.

In the Explanatory Memorandum on Com (2000) 495, the Government indicated that improvements in the arrangements for requesting information on existing criminal records should be given priority over creating a European Criminal Registry. The practical benefits of the proposed European Criminal Registry should be carefully assessed in view of the possibility of high costs and data protection considerations.

As regards the determination of claims of jurisdiction, and the roles that Eurojust and the European Court of Justice might have, the Government consider that it would be appropriate to wait until Eurojust has developed relevant experience before developing criteria for ranking such claims.

The Government consider that the discussions in Com (2000) 495 on ne bis in idem are sensible; the suggestion that prosecutions are co-ordinated needs careful consideration, but no proposal has yet been tabled to address this issue.

For further information on the subject of mutual recognition, I refer the hon. Member to the Explanatory Memorandum on the Programme of Measures to implement the principle of mutual recognition.

Police (Administration)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he will take to reduce the burden of administration on the police. [134453]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are committed to looking at ways to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on the police, consistent with the interests of justice. It is important to recognise that many procedures, which may be time-consuming, are nevertheless necessary to protect both the accused person and the officers who deal with him or her. Some paperwork is a necessary part of the job.

The Home Office has a significant role in setting the administrative framework for policing and we will continue to collaborate with forces to reduce bureaucratic burdens whenever possible. A current review of the Codes of Practice which govern police procedures under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 should provide an opportunity for us to make further progress.

National guidance on the preparation of prosecution files by the police is set out in the "Manual of Guidance for the Preparation, Processing and Submission of Files". Case files completed in line with the guidance in that document will, in many cases, require only five or six forms. The Manual is issued to all forces and has just been updated for re-issue in November. The Cabinet Office Public Sector Team's Regulatory Impact Unit aims to identify ways of reducing bureaucracy, and police paperwork was the first area it studied. A member of the Unit sits on the Editorial Board of the Manual of Guidance.

When the Narey measures for speeding up the progress of cases through the criminal justice system were piloted in 1998–99, 54 per cent. of cases resulted in a guilty plea at first hearing and only required an expedited file. These measures were introduced nationally on 1 November 1999 and have been shown to have reduced paperwork significantly.

Forces themselves also have a role to play. A thematic report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) in 1997 found that in many forces additional forms were being added to those required by the existing Manual. HMIC recommended that all forces should review their use of non-Manual of Guidance forms to reduce the number that officers have to complete.

Another area in which significant improvements are possible is in the development of new information systems. The National Strategy for Police Information Systems (NSPIS) provides for the development of a range of standard, linked applications covering the main policing functions. The progressive implementation of these applications in forces will eliminate many of the current inefficiencies, such as officers having to key in the same information several times.

Further, under the initiative for integrating business and information systems in the criminal justice system ("IBIS"), detailed plans have been drawn up to ensure that the information systems which are being developed in all the criminal justice organisations have the necessary links installed for the efficient sharing and exchange of information throughout the criminal justice process.

Police Response Vehicles

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many police response vehicles have been involved in accidents in each London borough while attending to immediate response calls in the past year; [134312]

(2) what percentage of immediate response calls were met within the target time for the Metropolitan police in each borough in the most recent year for which figures are available. [134313]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Details are set out in the table. The information has been provided by the Metropolitan police service, and relates to the period between September 1999 and August 2000.

London borough	*Police response vehicles involved in accidents while attending to immediate response calls (actual numbers)*	*Immediate response calls met within the target time (%)*
City of Westminster	55	86
Kensington and Chelsea	28	85
Camden	42	74
Hammersmith and Fulham	35	89
Hackney	69	82
Tower Hamlets	44	78
Heathrow	0	90
Waltham Forest	35	76
Redbridge	44	77
Havering	26	75
Newham	58	70
Barking and Dagenham	29	83
Lambeth	49	80
Southwark	54	84
Islington	47	75
Lewisham	40	83
Bromley	29	78
Harrow	22	77
Brent	36	74
Greenwich	30	76
Bexley	18	86
Barnet	36	75
Richmond-upon-Thames	18	86
Hounslow	48	82
Kingston-upon-Thames	14	85
Merton	19	83
Wandsworth	46	84
Ealing	33	79
Hillingdon	32	77
Enfield	57	78
Haringey	27	72
Croydon	32	81
Sutton	19	86
Metropolitan police service	1,411	79

Schengen Agreement

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in which diplomatic missions of Her Majesty's Government are responsible for the issue of visas to nationals of Schengen countries. [134808]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

None. Nationals of Schengen countries, as EU citizens, do not require visas to visit the UK.

CABINET OFFICE

Drug Abuse

7. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she last met the drugs co-ordinator to discuss drug abuse. [133643]

Marjorie Mowlam: I met Keith Hellawell, the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator, on 17 October to discuss a wide range of drug issues in pursuance of the Government's anti-drugs strategy.

8. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to tackle the use of illegal drugs in rural areas. [133644]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Drug Action Teams are the main mechanism for delivery of the anti-drugs strategy on the ground, whether in rural areas or in inner cities. All Drug Action Teams are required to plan and deliver an effective programme of activities for drugs in line with the National Strategy. Drug Action Teams identify gaps in their provision and seek to address this. Hertfordshire DAT has been highlighted as high-performing: with programmes in all LEA schools; on drug awareness in the workplace; and to reduce the availability of drugs in prisons.

10. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the progress of the drug action teams. [133646]

Marjorie Mowlam: The effectiveness of drug action teams (DATs) is measured by an annual planning and reporting process based on plans and reports submitted by each DAT. The analysis of this year's plans and their reports for the financial year 1999–2000 has recently been completed. A summary is due for publication later this month in the co-ordinator's annual report.

20. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what priority she will give to treatment as part of the anti-drugs strategy. [133656]

Marjorie Mowlam: It is a key aim of the Government's anti-drugs strategy to enable people with drug problems to overcome them and live healthy and crime-free lives. It is for this reason that the recent spending review will see an increase in the annual spend on treatment services, including within prisons, to over £400 million by 2003–04.

GM Foods

9. **Mr. McGrady:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the current Government policy on genetically modified foods. [133645]

Marjorie Mowlam: Our policy is to ensure that the regulation of GM technology protects human health, the environment and consumer choice. We established the Food Standards Agency to provide independent assessment of the safety of all foods, including GM. We support safe assessment of the potential benefits of the technology.

Public Bodies

12. **Tony Wright:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what proposals she has to amend the system of appointment to public bodies. [133648]

Mr. Stringer: My right hon. Friend has no immediate plans to change the system of public appointments.

EU (Departmental Policy)

13. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she last met her Cabinet counterparts to agree the co-ordination of departmental policy towards the EU. [133649]

Marjorie Mowlam: Ministers regularly discuss the co-ordination of EU business.

Electronic Government

14. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on Britain's progress in developing electronic Government. [133650]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government continue to make strong progress towards the Prime Minister's target that by 2005 all Government services should be available online.

We have a good story to tell: for central Government we have identified 451 services to the citizen and to business, and already one third of them are available online.

Things you can do online now include:

ordering and paying for a company's financial returns;

checking to see if you need hospital treatment;

find out if it is safe to visit foreign countries;

fill out a tax form;

the public can also keep up to date with what is happening in Parliament and contact the Ombudsman online;

employees and employers can interactively calculate pay rates and entitlements under the national minimum wage regulations with further interactive guides to employment law to follow.

Compared to other countries the figure is high, as is the volume and quality of the material available on the web.

Much more detail about Government service than I can give here may be found in the reports monitoring progress towards the targets for electronic service. These include details of the innovative approaches that Departments have planned for future services.

The spring 2000 report has been placed in the Libraries of the House. My Department is preparing the autumn 2000 monitoring report which I will also be placing in the Libraries of the House.

21. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made in the development of the Government secure intranet. [133657]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government Secure Intranet (GSI) continues to make steady progress.

Seventy-one organisations are now connected and some 90,000 staff have e-mail access.

The GSI has met its original objectives of providing a secure e-mail service for Government and of achieving a step change in the number of civil servants with internet access.

For example, a secure e-mail gateway has been developed between the GSI and the new Police National Network Extranet and is already being used for collaborative policy drafting work between the DTI and DCMS sharing an intranet site for developing the Communications White Paper.

27. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on progress in introducing the electronic delivery of Government services. [133666]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government continue to make strong progress towards the Prime Minister's target that by 2005 all government services should be available on-line.

We have a good story to tell; for central Government we have identified 451 services to the citizen and to business and already one third of them are available on-line.

Things that can be done on-line now include:

ordering and paying for a company's financial returns;

checking to see if you need hospital treatment;

find out if it is safe to visit foreign countries;

fill out a tax form;

the public can also keep up to date with what is happening in Parliament and contact the Ombudsman on-line;

employees and employers can interactively calculate pay rates and entitlements under the national minimum wage regulations with further interactive guides to employment law to follow.

A comparison with other countries also shows that we are doing well, as the recent international benchmarking study showed. For example, although currently the number of two-way dealings that can be done on-line is low, at about 20 (but rising) compared to other countries the figure is high, as is the volume and quality of the material available on the web.

Manufacturing (Regulations)

15. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will calculate the number of regulations imposed on manufacturing businesses since May 1997. [133651]

Mr. Stringer: This information is not kept in the form requested and could be obtained only at disproportionate expense.

Since August 1998, every regulation likely to have an impact on businesses, charities or voluntary organisations has been subject to a thorough assessment procedure. These regulatory impact assessments are placed in the Libraries of the House. The particular business sectors upon which each regulation impacts are not recorded separately.

Drug Trafficking

16. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what action the UK Government are taking to tackle international trafficking in drugs. [133652]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government are working in close partnership with the enforcement and intelligence agencies to tackle international trafficking of all drugs, particularly Class A drugs which pose the greatest threat. Overseas activity is concentrated on the key source and transit countries to disrupt the movement of drugs to

Europe and the UK. In this country, every effort is being made to tackle the organised criminal enterprises involved in illicit drug trafficking.

Rural Affairs Committee

17. **Charlotte Atkins:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the work of the Rural Affairs Committee. [133653]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Ministerial Group on Rural Affairs co-ordinates Government policy on rural issues. Recently, it has been working on the Rural White Paper.

Focus 5000

18. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Focus 5000 group in helping shape Government policy. [133654]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I take it that my hon. Friend is referring to the People's Panel. An independent interim evaluation of the Panel was published and referred to on 23 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 451W. Copies were placed in the Library. The evaluation report concluded that the Panel was a "valuable asset" and had

> proved its worth as a vehicle to promote greater understanding, within local and national government, of public views, and of the need to obtain these views.

A full evaluation of the effectiveness of the Panel in helping shape Government policy will be carried out early in 2001.

Leak Inquiries

19. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many leak inquiries have been commissioned by Departments in the last 12 months. [133655]

Mr. Stringer: Since 1 October 1999, the Cabinet Office has been notified of 19 leak investigations commissioned by Government Departments.

Quangos

22. **Jane Griffiths:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she is taking to ensure diversity in appointments to quangos. [133660]

Mr. Stringer: The Government are keen to ensure that those serving on the boards of public bodies are as representative of society as possible. It is committed to the equal representation of women and men in public appointments and a pro-rata representation of members of the ethnic minorities. Is also wants to encourage more disabled people to participate in public life.

The Public Appointments Unit in the Cabinet Office produces annually the Government's overall action plan in relation to equal opportunities in public appointments. The publication also includes departments individual action plans specific to their own bodies. "Quangos: Opening up Public Appointments 2000–2003" was published on 24 May 2000 and provides details of what steps are being taken to increase diversity in public appointments.

Better Regulation Task Force

23. **Mr. Fallon:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many recommendations of the better regulation task force have so far been implemented; and how many remain outstanding. [133661]

Mr. Stringer: The independent better regulation task force has, since its inception in 1997, produced 14 substantive reviews which have made a total of 264 recommendations. Of the 250 the Government have so far responded to, 204 have been accepted in full, 11 accepted in principle and eight accepted in part. The Government are considering a further 21 recommendations. We have not accepted six of the Task Force's recommendations.

The recommendations are a variety of types: some involving primary legislation; others about changing the practices of those in the regulatory and enforcement environments; and others applying to all areas of Government activity, for example on the quality of guidance. For this reason it is not possible to quantify how many have been implemented.

26. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the work of the better regulation task force. [133665]

Mr. Stringer: The independent better regulation task force has recently published its third annual report (available in the Library of the House) which sets out its achievements over the last three years and indicates its likely work programme for the coming year.

Press Officers

24. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the role of departmental press officers. [133663]

Marjorie Mowlam: The role of departmental press officers, as outlined in the guidance on the work of the GIS, is to ensure that Government policy and actions are explained and presented in a positive light and that the best possible opportunity is taken to convey its messages to the public through the media. The work of departmental press officers is explained in more detail in the guidance on the work of the GIS and the GICS handbook, copies of both are available in the Library.

"All Our Futures"

25. **Ms Perham:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on progress in implementing the recommendations of the report of the better government for older people programme entitled "All Our Futures". [133664]

Mr. Ian McCartney: We are considering our response to the recommendations and how they can best be implemented. This involves discussions with other Government Departments, the Local Government Association and the Better Government for Older People Steering Group. Good progress is being made and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security will respond in due course.

Better Government Programme

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the delivery of the better government programme in Yorkshire and Humberside. [133647]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber is working with other stakeholders to modernise services across the region and I am pleased to say that excellent progress is being made.

Two examples from the region are cited in "Citizens First", the Modernising Government Annual Report: the Inland Revenue's translation service, which is being piloted with 128 languages in South Yorkshire; and the introduction of videolink kiosks in East Yorkshire which makes it easier to access local services such as police, law centres, NHS Direct, council departments or the Benefits Agency.

Much more detail about Government service than I can give here may be found in the reports monitoring progress towards the targets for electronic service. These include details of the innovative approaches that Departments have planned for future services.

The spring 2000 report has been placed in the Libraries of the House. My Department is preparing the autumn 2000 monitoring report which I will also be placing in the Libraries of the House.

New Regulations

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office in what form monthly statistics on departmental returns concerning new regulations are available. [135992]

Mr. Stringer: The lists of monthly returns by Departments of regulatory proposals that have an impact on business, charities and voluntary bodies are published on the Cabinet Office website at www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/index/regrep.htm and subsequently in the six monthly Command Paper of Regulatory Impact Assessments. Both list proposals in date order, with a contact name and telephone number of an official in the appropriate Department who can provide details of the measures and any relevant consultation document or regulatory impact assessment.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

EU (Trades Unions)

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on proposals for *(a)* an EU-wide minimum wage and *(b)* EU-wide collective bargaining by trades unions. [135377]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

(a) Article 137(6) of the Treaty establishing the community specifically excludes action on pay. Therefore pay remains a matter for member states. The introduction of an EU minimum wage would run contrary to that position.

(b) It is for employers, employees and their representative organisations to agree whether and at what level any bargaining might take place, subject to the requirements of national laws and practices.

European Public Prosecutor

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made on document COM (2000) 608, concerning a European public prosecutor; and if the Government intend to veto proposals to amend the treaties in respect of the Nice Council. [134378]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

Document COM (2000) 608 is the Commission's contribution to the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on the protection of the Community's financial interests, and is being considered by member states in that context. The Government's position is that the IGC should focus on the issues necessary for enlargement.

The United Kingdom Government do not support the creation of a European public prosecutor (EPP) and will oppose any moves in this direction. We have made our position on this clear to the Commission, to the Council and to the European Parliament.

British-Russia Centre

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the annual report of the British-Russia Centre and British East-West Centre will be available. [136226]

Mr. Vaz: Copies of the centres' annual report for financial year 1999–2000 were placed in the Libraries of the House last week. The centres received grant in aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of £230,850 to support their activities in 1999–2000. In addition, the centres secured funding of £257,130 for direct expenditure on projects. The centres manage projects to promote and support the development of democratic institutions and the rule of law and society in Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Activities last year included organisation of the UK team of OSCE observers to the Russian Duma elections, hosting a human rights seminar in Minsk, co-hosting a conference on the Russian economy and organising visits and lectures.

The FCO's quinquennial review of the centres in 1999 confirmed that the centres continued to make a valuable contribution to the strengthening of bilateral relations with Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The review's main recommendation was that the FCO's grant in aid should be spent on the project work of the centres and that membership activities should become self-financing. The centres have begun to implement this recommendation.

Parliamentary Scrutiny of Treaties

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the Government plan to respond to the second report of the Procedure Committee of Session 1999–2000, Parliamentary Scrutiny of Treaties (HC210). [136227]

Mr. Battle: The Government's response to the Procedure Committee's report was presented to Parliament yesterday in the form of an unnumbered Command Paper. Copies are available from the Vote Office.

Kosovo

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the supply of hydraulic lifting equipment for use by the Irish KFOR contingent in Kosovo. [136516]

Mr. Vaz: We are happy to approve an export licence for the supply of spare parts for the maintenance of hydraulic lifting systems for use by the Irish KFOR contingent. The goods will assist KFOR in the valuable work they are doing reconstructing a peaceful Kosovo.

These goods appear on the UK's military list. UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1160 (1998) prohibits the supply of arms and related material to the FRY. However, UNSCR 1244 (1999) provides that the prohibitions imposed by SCR 1160 shall not apply to the sale or supply of arms and related material for use by the international civil and security presence in Kosovo.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if Sherbimi Informativ I Kosaves is *(a)* officially and *(b)* informally active in Kosovo. [134197]

Mr. Vaz: The UN Mission in Kosovo has not given permission to any organisation called Sherbimi Informativ I Kosaves (or Kosovo Intelligence Service) to be active in Kosovo. The international presence in Kosovo continues to monitor and take action against any parallel structures or institutions in Kosovo where they pose a threat to KFOR's or UNMIK's objectives.

European Federation of Retired and Elderly Persons

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the answer of the

Prime Minister of 19 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 286W, if he will deposit in the Library a copy of his letter to the European Federation of Retired and Elderly Persons. [134145]

Mr. Vaz: A copy has been deposited in the Library of the House.

UN Drug Control Programme

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assessment he has made of the necessity of genetically modifying the mycotoxins involved in the United Nations Drug Control Programme research into the use of mycotoxins in drug crop eradication programmes; and if he will make a statement; [134272]

(2) what assessment he has made of the potential dangers arising from United Nations Drug Control Programme research into the use of mycotoxins in drug crop eradication programmes; and if he will make a statement; [134271]

(3) what assessment he has made of the potential for mutation of the mycotoxins involved in the United Nations Drug Control Programme research into the use of mycotoxins in drug crop eradication programmes; and if he will make a statement; [134273]

(4) what assessment he has made of the potential dangers arising from the use of *(a)* naturally occurring and *(b)* genetically-modified mycotoxins in drug crop eradication programmes; and if he will make a statement. [134274]

Mr. Battle: The only United Nations International Drugs Programme (UNDCP) research into mycotoxins in drug crop eradication programmes is into the opium poppy fungus, pleospora papaveracea. The UK has supported this programme which has focused on establishing whether this naturally occurring fungus is viable as an opium poppy control agent and whether the fungus is specific to opium poppy.

Subject to the progress of research in this phase, a further phase of research would investigate wider safety issues, including the potential for mutation. The Government have made it clear that if research revealed harmful effects, the UK would withdraw support and press for closure of the programme.

No consideration is being given to the use of genetically modified mycotoxins in drug crop eradication programmes.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much has been contributed by his Department towards the funding of United Nations Drug Control Programme research during each of the last five years for which figures are available. [134276]

Mr. Battle: There was no FCO spending on research programmes of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) in the financial years 1995–96 or 1996–97. Figures since then are as follows:

1997–98—£100,000 for research into pleospora papaveracea

1998–99—£58,281 for assessment of drug abuse in Iran

1999–2000—£1,051,748 for surveys of coca and poppy cultivation in Columbia, Peru and Afghanistan and studies of the drugs trade in Afghanistan.

In addition, in 1999–2000 the FCO contributed £100,000 to the UNDCP Caribbean Coordination Mechanism, of which a proportion, not readily disaggregated, contributes to collection of information on the drug problem in the Caribbean region.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which states have contributed towards the funding of United Nations Drug Control Programme research into the use of *(a)* pleospora papaverecea; *(b)* fusarium oxysporum and *(c)* other mycotoxins in drug crop eradication programmes during each of the last five years for which figures are available. [134264]

Mr. Battle: The United Kingdom and the United States have contributed to the funding of the United Nations International Drugs Control Programme (UNDCP) research into the opium poppy fungus, pleospora papaveracea. The UK contributed £100,000 to the project in 1998. There is no current UNDCP research into either the coca fungus, fusarium oxysporum, or other mycotoxins for drug crop eradication programmes.

Saudi Arabia

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions the United Kingdom Government have had with the Saudi Arabian authorities on the establishment by Saudi Arabia of the governmental and non-governmental organisations recommended by the UN Commission on Human Rights. [133945]

Mr. Hain: From discussions between the British Embassy in Riyadh and the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we understand that details of the governmental committee are being finalised. As far as we are aware, a date for the committee's first meeting has not been agreed. Progress to establish a non-governmental committee has been slower. We will continue to press the Saudis.

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made to the Saudi Arabian Government in support of increased access to Saudi Arabia for non-governmental human rights monitors, with particular reference to monitors from Amnesty International. [133947]

Mr. Hain: The Government have not been asked by Amnesty International or any other non-governmental organisation to approach the Saudi Government about access to the Kingdom. In the first instance, this is a matter for individual NGOs to discuss with the Saudi Government.

Iran

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Government of Iran about human rights in that country. [134763]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners regularly press the Iranian authorities over our concerns about human rights issues in Iran. The Foreign Secretary raised human rights matters with his counterpart Dr. Kamal Kharrazi when they met in New York on 15 September, and also

with the Iranian Ambassador to London on 4 October. I too discussed these issues with Ambassador Sarmadi on 19 October.

In addition, we regularly raise our concerns through our Ambassador in Tehran.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the situation of Jews in Iran. [134776]

Mr. Hain: The Jewish community in Iran is represented, as are other minorities, by a member in the Majles, and Judaism is among the religions recognised by the Constitution. Jewish Iranians are free to run businesses and enjoy their own culture, although the right to take public office is circumscribed.

However, we remain concerned at the sentencing of 10 Jews and two Muslims in the Shiraz trial. We have throughout the trial raised our concerns about the nature of the proceedings. We hope that the Iranian Judiciary will show clemency.

Peace Process (Middle East)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contribution he is seeking to make to the resolution of conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people. [134692]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary and I are committed to supporting all efforts to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's extended visit to the region was part of the intensive international efforts which led to the Sharm el-Sheikh summit on 16–17 October. The agenda agreed there, for disengagement by both sides, an end to violence and a return to peace talks remains the focus for all as we work with others to end this crisis. My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary and I are maintaining close contact with the parties.

War Crimes Tribunal

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress of the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. [134695]

Mr. Hain: To date, ICTY have concluded 11 cases. There are currently 39 individuals in proceedings before the Tribunal and 25 publicly indicated individuals remain at large.

International Relations (Far East)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the current state of relations between *(a)* China and Taiwan and *(b)* North and South Korea. [134735]

Mr. Battle: *(a)* China and Taiwan: We monitor developments in relations across the Taiwan Straits closely. Since the election of Chen Shui bian both sides have shown evidence of restraint in their rhetoric and actions, although they have not yet been able to reach any consensus over the "One China" issue which might enable them to resume direct dialogue. We continue to encourage dialogue between the two sides and we are strongly opposed to the use of force in resolving the question of Taiwan's status.

(b) We have expressed our strong support for the President of South Korea Kim Dae-Jung's policy of engagement aimed at peace and reconciliation between North and South Korea. We are pleased that both sides are committed to implementing the results of June's Summit and we welcome the people-to-people links that have taken place, including family reunions and co-operation between the North and South Korean teams at the opening of the Sydney Olympics. A series of political and military meetings between both sides is under way. Work has also begun on re-establishing a rail link between North and South Korea across the Demilitarised Zone.

The engagement process has been given further impetus by the recent US/North Korea negotiations, notably Ms Albright's visit to Pyongyang. There remain many serious issues, including missile proliferation, nuclear matters and human rights, to be discussed and addressed. But progress since the June summit has been encouraging.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with representatives of political parties in Zimbabwe. [134696]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had a number of discussions with Zimbabwean politicians from both the main political parties, including several telephone conversations with the president of the Movement for Democratic Change. More recently, I met members of the MDC Executive on 26 October.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Sierra Leone. [134693]

Mr. Hain: The Government's strategy towards Sierra Leone was set out in the Foreign Secretary's statement on 6 June. That strategy remains unchanged. Our objective is to ensure that the people of Sierra Leone are offered a realistic prospect of peace and stability, and are freed from the violence of a brutal rebel minority.

On 10 October Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean announced in another place a further package of UK support to the Sierra Leone Army, and to the UN peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone. UK assistance will help the Government of Sierra Leone establish effective and accountable armed forces.

Intergovernmental Conference

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the subject areas which are expected to be on the agenda for negotiations at the Nice Intergovernmental Conference. [134734]

Mr. Vaz: The Feira European Council on 19 and 20 June clarified the IGC agenda. It remains focused on the institutional changes necessary for enlargement. The main issues are the size and composition of the

Commission, the reweighting of votes in the Council of Ministers, the extension of qualified majority voting and closer co-operation between individual member states.

Cuba

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit Cuba. [134694]

Mr. Battle: There are no plans at present for the Secretary of State to visit Cuba.

Amsterdam Treaty

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the subsidiarity and proportionality protocol in the Treaty of Amsterdam. [134764]

Mr. Vaz: The Government regard subsidiarity as a key principle, and support the Amsterdam protocol, which sets out in detail how it is applied. It is too early to make a full assessment of the concrete results of the protocol, as it has only been in force for one year. But the Government are confident that it will be effective because it is legally enforceable, and should therefore help deter the bringing forward of proposals which breach the principle. The better the protocol works, the less we will see it.

Muslim Fundamentalism

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the growth of international Muslim fundamentalist terrorism. [135020]

Mr. Battle: The Government condemn terrorism in all its forms, by whomever or wherever it is committed. In the light of a number of terrorist attacks in recent years attributable to Islamic extremists, the Government take this threat seriously.

Sanctions against Austria

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy was in relation to *(a)* the imposition of, and *(b)* the lifting of sanctions against Austria. [135040]

Mr. Vaz: The measures were introduced in February by Austria's EU partners to send a clear signal of our concern at the inclusion of a far-right party in the Austrian Government. I shared the analysis in the 8 September report by the Wise Men that the measures had been successful in influencing the Austrian Government to uphold common democratic values and in energising Austrian civil society, but that the measures would become counterproductive if continued. The Government therefore decided, together with our other EU partners, to lift the measures on 12 September, while remaining vigilant in relation to the Freedom Party.

HALO Trust

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Russian claims of involvement by the HALO Trust in training terrorists. [135038]

Mr. Vaz: We have repeatedly expressed our concern to the Russian authorities about these allegations. We have seen no credible evidence to support their claims. HALO's sole purpose in Chechnya was to train Chechen civilians in humanitarian mine clearance, as they have done elsewhere.

National Missile Defence

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his Department's policy is in relation to National Missile Defence. [135044]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee's Inquiry on Weapons of Mass Destruction; and to the Government's response to the Committee's recommendations, which was presented to Parliament on 24 October.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has held with the United States Secretary of State about National Missile Defense. [134945]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has regularly discussed this issue with a range of US interlocutors, including the US Secretary of State.

Kursk Submarine

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Russian claims of NATO involvement in the loss of the submarine Kursk. [135037]

Mr. Vaz: No NATO or UK assets were in the location at the time of the sinking of the Kursk submarine on 12 August.

Single European Foreign Policy

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the development of a single European foreign policy. [135021]

Mr. Vaz: The Government want Europe to have a strong voice in international affairs and are committed to pursuing this through the intergovernmental mechanisms of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The Prime Minister launched the European Defence Initiative to strengthen the CFSP and the European contribution to NATO. The EU's CFSP is an increasingly important means of achieving the UK's national foreign policy objectives. The Government, and most member states, favour maintaining the intergovernmental approach to CFSP.

AIDS (South Africa)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Development on how to assist the South African Government to combat the spread of AIDS. [134923]

Mr. Hain: The HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa is a major development policy priority for the UK Government and there is an on-going dialogue between FCO, DFID and other Government Departments on HIV/AIDS policy both at the international level and within the African region.

At the international level, recent examples include coordination with DFID for the UN Security Council Resolution on HIV/AIDS and ongoing UN discussions on HIV/AIDS. Health, including HIV/AIDS, is an important part of DFID's second White Paper due out this autumn, the FCO has worked closely with DFID on this.

At a regional and country level FCO works closely with DFID in implementing country strategies, each of which have HIV/AIDS prevention and care as a major priority.

In November 1999, while in South Africa, the Prime Minister announced a package of assistance, worth £22.7 million, to Southern Africa to support the battle against HIV/AIDS. The package includes a development cooperation agreement with the South African Ministry of Health focusing on reproductive health service programmes in selected provinces, as well as HIV/AIDS information awareness and education programmes for young people.

The UK Government's development assistance also aims to build South African capacity to play a constructive role in regional development issues such as HIV/AIDS.

Single Currency

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had, and on what dates, with *(a)* the Chancellor of the Exchequer and *(b)* the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about the timing of a future referendum on British participation in the single European currency. [135007]

Mr. Vaz: The Secretary of State meets his Cabinet colleagues on a regular basis and discusses a wide range of issues.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the political factors affecting his assessment of the desirability of the United Kingdom replacing the pound with the euro. [135042]

Mr. Vaz: The Chancellor of the Exchequer said in his statement on 27 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns 583–88, that

> the determining factor as to whether Britain joins a single currency is the national economic interest, and whether the economic case for doing so is clear and unambiguous.

He also stated that

> there is no constitutional bar to British membership of EMU.

Ex-President Milosevic

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he intends to take to ensure that ex-President Milosevic is brought to trial. [134947]

Mr. Vaz: We have made it clear to the Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that we will expect it to meet its international obligations in a spirit of partnership with the international community. This includes cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia.

Iraq

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his assessment is of Iraq's access to weapons of mass destruction. [134922]

Mr. Hain: Up until their withdrawal from Iraq in December 1998, UN weapons inspectors consistently reported to the United Nations Security Council that serious gaps remained in Iraq's declarations on chemical and biological weapons and ballistic missiles. We are deeply concerned that weapons inspectors have been unable to operate in Iraq for approaching two years. Hence the importance we attach to the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) gaining access to Iraq at the earliest opportunity.

Biological Weapons Convention

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of current Russian compliance with the provisions of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention. [135041]

Mr. Hain: The United Kingdom makes global assessments on compliance with all arms control regimes, including the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), which draw upon intelligence sources. We do not comment on intelligence matters.

Russia is a state party and depositary Government of the BTWC and is currently participating in the negotiations in Geneva on a compliance protocol to strengthen the convention. We very much hope that these negotiations will be successful, as such a protocol would improve transparency of the activities which could be abused for the development of biological weapons and provide internationally agreed mechanisms with which to pursue compliance concerns.

Lord Levy

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the role of Lord Levy has been in the Middle East during the past three months. [134944]

Mr. Hain: During the past three months Lord Levy has been to Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Egypt. In Israel he met Prime Minister Barak, President Katsav and other ministers. In the Palestinian Authority he met President Arafat and other senior Palestinian figures. In Jordan he met King Abdullah and various other ministers. In Egypt he met Foreign Minister Moussa and various other senior officials. He also accompanied the Foreign Secretary during his recent visit to the region.

International Criminal Court

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in the establishment of an International Criminal Court. [134946]

Mr. Hain: To date the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court has been signed by 115 states and ratified by 22. The court will be established once 60 states ratify. A Preparatory Commission completed two important subsidiary documents to the statute at its last session in June.

Moscow Visit

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit Moscow. [134920]

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign Secretary has no plans at present to visit Russia.

EU (Co-sovereignty)

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is towards the proposal of the German Foreign Minister for co-sovereignty between states within the European Union. [135039]

Mr. Vaz: The Government welcome all contributions to the debate on Europe's future. Our own views were set out by the Prime Minister in his speech in Warsaw on 6 October.

European Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the relationship between Articles 3 and 13 of the draft European Charter of Fundamental Rights. [134820]

Mr. Vaz: Article 13 (freedom of the arts and sciences) is a general statement of the principles in ECHR Article 10, as far as it applies to arts and sciences. The latter article allows limitations. The freedom of research in Article 13 must be interpreted consistently with Article 3 and subject to the limitations permitted under Article 10 ECHR.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much money he estimates will need to be set aside for implementation of the draft Charter of Fundamental Rights for *(a)* legal aid for cases brought under it and *(b)* legal costs for Her Majesty's Government to defend against claims. [135569]

Mr. Vaz: None. The charter is a political declaration and is not legally binding. It brings together in a single document fundamental rights, freedoms and principles that already exist within the EU.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those UK agencies covered by Article 36 of the draft Charter of Fundamental Rights. [135573]

Mr. Vaz: The charter will be a political declaration of rights, freedoms and principles and is not legally binding. Article 36 deals with the principle of the EU Institutions respecting access to services of general economic interest. The article reflects Article 16 of the Treaty establishing the European Community and does not create any new right.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy towards inclusion of Article 12.2 in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. [135568]

Mr. Vaz: Article 12.2 of the charter is a restatement of the existing principle set out in Article 191 of the Treaty establishing the European Community.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if, pursuant to Article 23 of the draft Charter of Fundamental Rights, he proposes to adopt measures for specific advantage in favour of the under-represented sex in the work force; and in which case men are the under-represented. [135567]

Mr. Vaz: No. The charter is a political declaration of rights, freedoms and principles recognised within the EU, and is not legally binding.

East Timor

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assistance the UK is providing for East Timor's civil and foreign service. [135072]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* Ten members of East Timor's future diplomatic service will attend a four-week training course in the UK from 4 November to 5 December. We have also made a commitment to assist with civil service training for the newly established National Council in the New Year.

Italy

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the state of relations between Her Majesty's Government and the Government of Italy. [135850]

Mr. Vaz: Our bilateral relations with Italy are excellent, and continue to flourish. The closeness of the relationship was further demonstrated by the very successful state visit to Italy last month, when the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh enjoyed the exceptionally warm welcome and hospitality of the Italian people. The Queen and the Duke were accompanied on the visit by the Foreign Secretary , and the Minister for Europe. Both Ministers met leading figures from Italian politics.

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the impact of the recent state visit to Italy. [135851]

Mr. Vaz: The state visit to Italy has served to convey the strongest possible reaffirmation of the high regard that our countries have for one another; as friends, allies and economic partners. The Queen's meetings with leading figures from the political and business fields, as well as those of the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe, demonstrated the keenness that our countries have to work closely together, for the mutual benefit of both countries, and for the EU as a whole.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 2 November 2000

DEFENCE

Royal Navy Ships

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Royal Navy ships have been ordered since May 1997; and on what dates. [134927]

Mr. Hoon: On 19 June 2000, the Minister for Defence Procurement announced the placing of an order with Vosper Thornycroft (UK) Ltd. for two new Multi-Role Hydrographic and Oceanographic Survey Vessels together with 25 years contractor support. The ships, to be named HMS Echo and HMS Enterprise, will be built under sub-contract at Appledore Shipbuilders in Devon, and are due to enter service in 2002 and 2003.

During the debate on Defence Procurement on 26 October, I announced that we intended to order four alternative landing ship logistic (ALSLs), subject to negotiation of satisfactory terms and conditions.

I also announced that, subject to final negotiations, we intend to sign a 25-year private finance initiative contract with AWSR Shipping Ltd. to provide for the strategic sealift capability. This will involve the construction of six new roll on roll off (RORO) vessels; two at Harland and Wolff in Northern Ireland and four in a German shipyard.

It is also intended that, subject to satisfactory arrangements being agreed, the order for the first new type 45 Destroyers will be placed later this year. It is planned that the first and third ships will be assembled by BAE Systems Marine and the second by Vosper Thornycroft (UK) Ltd.

TRACER Programme

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the future of the TRACER programme as a bilateral programme with the United States of America. [135834]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* Bilateral collaboration is continuing on the UK's Tactical Reconnaissance Armoured Combat Equipment Requirement (TRACER) and the US Future Scout and Cavalry System (FSCS).

The current phase of the programme is of 42 months duration and finishes in July 2002. The programme is proceeding to schedule and both Governments are pleased with progress to date.

In parallel, the UK is conducting studies to examine the use of unmanned air vehicles to complement ground-based reconnaissance. The outcome of these studies will be used to inform the UK decision on the optimum mix of platforms, technology and sensors and the role that TRACER will play in the Army's future battlefield information gathering.

Neither nation is committed beyond the current phase. At the end of this phase there will be a comprehensive review, and the decision on how to proceed will take account of all relevant factors.

Military Graves

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the non-war graves where maintenance to an appropriate standard is impossible for *(a)* climatic and *(b)* political reasons. [134307]

Dr. Moonie: The standard of maintenance of those service graves designated non-world war graves varies according to the prevailing weather and local climatic conditions in the countries in which the graves are located. I am able to confirm however, that in general there are no non-world war graves that are impossible to maintain to the appropriate standard for climatic reasons, though they may not appear the same as those located in a typical war grave cemetery in, for example, north-west Europe. Local conditions are taken into account when selecting the material used for headstones or markers and the design of the cemetery.

The changing worldwide political situation does mean that at times cemeteries containing war graves and non-world war graves are difficult or impossible to maintain. Currently, activity is restricted or impossible in Algeria, Ambon (Indonesia), Iraq and Mogadishu (Somalia). It can be difficult to maintain cemeteries in Northern Cyprus, parts of the Middle East, particularly Libya and China, and even Northern Ireland for political and security reasons. Restoration work on non-world war graves maintained on our behalf by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Trincomalee (Sri Lanka) is resuming.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the responsibilities of the Army Casualty Cell. [134305]

Dr. Moonie: The Army Casualty Cell is responsible for the following:

(a) monitoring and recording all Listed Army casualties in Peace and War and ensuring next of kin are notified in each case.

(b) repatriating the remains of those soldiers who die overseas and remaining long term point of contact for next of kin.

(c) providing an Army casualty helpline in the event of a major casualty incident occurring in either peace or war.

(d) advising on arrangements for public expense funerals of those soldiers who die in service, when requested by next of kin.

(e) erecting standard military pattern headstones on the graves of deceased soldiers, when requested by next of kin.

(f) focal point for policy issues relating to post 1947 Army non war graves in the UK.

(g) overseeing the maintenance of post 1947 tri-service non war graves overseas where not already managed by another agency.

(h) facilitating the flow of information from concerned relatives to service personnel and their dependants serving overseas.

(i) authorising compassionate leave and travel back to the UK in cases of the death or imminent death of close relatives.

(j) authorising the travel of close relatives to visit service personnel who are very seriously ill overseas.

(k) identification of the remains of recently discovered soldiers killed in either of the World Wars, tracing and notifying the remaining family and organising the funeral.

(l) answering inquiries from members of the public and Members of Parliament in respect of subjects relating to the Army Casualty Cell's activities.

(m) monitoring Boards of Inquiry into cases of deceased soldiers and arranging for release of the Board of Inquiry report to the next of kin.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence from 1 October what will be the annual budget of the Army Casualty Cell at Upavon in respect of non-war graves in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* overseas. [134304]

Dr. Moonie: The Army Casualty Cell assumed responsibility for overseas non-war graves from 1 October 2000, but will not take over the financial responsibility until April 2001. £180,000 has been allocated for this task. The maintenance of non-war graves in the UK is the responsibility of Land Command and is funded as part of their overall budget for property management. It follows that the Army Casualty Cell has no annual budget for this purpose.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the current annual budgets for *(a)* the Royal Navy and *(b)* the Royal Air Force in respect of their non-war graves in the UK. [134306]

Dr. Moonie: Both the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force meet the costs of funerals, burial plots, headstones, marker stones and related costs for personnel who die while in service. In financial year 2000–01 the Royal Air Force allocation is £70,000. The Royal Navy allocation is not separately identified. The costs of subsequently maintaining non-war graves are met from local works service budgets and are not separately identified by either service.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in each of the past five years what has been the annual contribution from British Government sources to the South African Heritage Committee in respect of Boer War graves. [134297]

Dr. Moonie: Ordinarily, the British Government make an annual donation of £10,000 to the South African Heritage Resource Agency (SAHRA) towards the maintenance of Boer War graves. In 1999, however, it was decided that an additional donation of £5,000 should be paid for three years, ending in 2001. This temporary increase in the contribution was established in order to support the SAHRA's initiative to employ a single contractor to maintain all British graves throughout South Africa.

	£
1996	10,000
1997	10,000
1998	10,000
1999	15,000
2000	15,000

Fuel Tankers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the specification is of fuel tankers used by *(a)* the Army and *(b)* the other armed services; how this differs from the specification of commercial fuel tankers in use in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [136061]

Mr. Spellar: The armed forces currently use three sizes of bulk fuel tanker (12,000 litre, 22,500 litre and 32,000 litre). The 32,000 litre fuel tanker is commercially based and has a similar specification to modern commercial fuel tankers. It employs commercial standard safety systems, is fully compliant with "Accord European relatif au transport des Marchandises Dangerous par Route (ADR) Directive" requirements and approved for use under the petroleum industry's Safe Loading Pass Scheme (SLPS). The 22,500 litre and 12,000 litre fuel tankers are older; they are not fully compliant with ADR regulations as they were constructed to specifications reflecting Carriage of Dangerous Goods (CDG) regulations in force at the time of manufacture.

In general terms, the specification of military tankers is enhanced to optimise them for military use. Military tankers differ from commercial tankers in the numbers of filling and discharge points; they are fitted with an integral pump to permit cross-loading and kerbside refuellng of convoys and tend to be tougher in construction.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel are qualified to drive commercial fuel tankers of the type in use in the UK; how many were qualified to do so on 1 January; how many are undergoing training which would enable them to drive such commercial fuel tankers; and if he will make a statement. [136060]

Mr. Spellar: Some 300 service personnel are qualified to drive commercial fuel tankers—the figure is the same for 1 January—of which 180 could be made available for this purpose. Around 900 additional drivers are currently being trained to drive commercial tankers.

Courts Martial

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what changes will be made in courts martial as a result of the incorporation into UK law of the European Convention on Human Rights. [135060]

Mr. Spellar: Changes have already been made so that courts martial procedures are compatible with Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which concerns the right to a fair trial. These were included in the Armed Forces Act 1996, which introduced reforms to reinforce the independence of the courts martial system. The changes came into effect on 1 April 1997.

No further changes to the legislation on the conduct of courts martial are planned as a result of the incorporation into UK law of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Eurolift Project

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress made at EU level on the Eurolift project for the establishment of an EU air transport command. [135661]

Mr. Hoon: There is no Eurolift project for the establishment of an EU air transport command. The European Air Group, which comprises seven European nations—Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and UK—is, however, conducting a study into options for improving interoperability and co-ordination

of military airlift between member nations. The study is not expected to be completed before the end of this year, so it would be premature to judge the outcome at this stage.

Fuel Crisis

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence of those troops being trained for duties in the event of another fuel crisis, how many have been trained to assist the police in relation to public order offences. [136067]

Mr. Spellar: None.

RAF Benson

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence by how many *(a)* civilians and *(b)* RAF personnel the two Lynx deep-servicing lines at RAF Benson are undermanned; and if he will make a statement. [134299]

Mr. Spellar: There are no Lynx deep servicing lines at RAF Benson.

Army Training Estates Review

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the outcome of the Army Training Estates Review; and if he will make a statement. [134302]

Mr. Spellar: There are currently two similarly named reviews being carried out within the Ministry of Defence.

First, Land Command is conducting an Army Training Estate Site Utility Review. This aims to identify Land Command training areas, camps and ranges which are no longer required in order that they can be closed or sold, thereby saving maintenance costs and where possible generating revenue. The review team will make their recommendations by the end of this calendar year. Secondly, the Army Training and Recruiting Agency is conducting a review into the strategic development of the Agency over the next few years and this may have an impact on its estate. Work is still at a very early stage and no decisions have been taken.

Russian Plutonium/Chemical Weapons

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the locations where the Russian plutonium stockpiles covered by the UK's programme of help with disposal of such material have been disposed of. [134352]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the locations where the Russian chemical weapons covered by the UK's programme of help with disposal of such weapons have been disposed of. [134351]

Mr. Spellar: In July, as part of Spending Review 2000, up to £12 million was allocated to the Ministry of Defence for high priority chemical demilitarisation and co-operative biological non proliferation projects in Russia. This funding will be available over a three-year period starting in April 2001. A study of possible options for UK assistance is currently under way. No decisions on specific projects have yet been taken.

Atlantic Star

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make it his policy to recommend the award of the Atlantic Star to Russian convoy veterans for their service in the Arctic Ocean during World War II; and if he will make a statement. [135881]

Mr. Hill: I have been asked to reply.

The Registry of Shipping and Seamen (RSS), part of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency issues all campaign stars in respect of Merchant Seamen. The qualifications for the Atlantic Star require that the 1939–45 Star must first have been earned by six months' service at sea and then must be followed by a further six months' service at sea before 8 May 1945, with at least one voyage in the qualifying area ie across the Atlantic, South Atlantic or service in convoys to North Russia. This award is available to all British seafarers who fulfil the criteria.

Merchant Shipping Notice M.279, which sets out the criteria for campaign stars for Merchant Seamen, was published in 1946 and is still in use to assess awards. It remains official policy to award the Atlantic Star to Russian convoy veterans who are British seafarers provided they make a request and fulfil the necessary criteria.

Evidence of service is taken either from the discharge book of the veteran, or, if this is not available, from the discharge summaries and ships log books which are held at RSS Cardiff.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Train Safety

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the effectiveness of hammers carried on trains for use in emergencies to break window glass; and if he will make a statement. [134340]

Mr. Hill: This and other matters relating to the evacuation of trains in an emergency are under review by the Health and Safety Commission. The Railways (Safety Case) Regulations 2000, which were laid before the House on 2 October following proposals from the Commission, will require train operators to revise their safety cases to include, among other things, details of the train evacuation equipment and arrangements which they have in place or propose. These revised safety cases will have to be submitted to the Health and Safety Executive for formal acceptance.

The Commission expects shortly to receive a report from a railway industry working group which is considering these issues. The Commission and Executive will take any further action which may be appropriate in the light of the industry's proposals and any relevant recommendations which may arise from Lord Cullen's public inquiry.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements are made to test the effectiveness of safety equipment carried on passenger trains. [134339]

Mr. Hill: There are many different types of safety equipment carried on passenger trains. Arrangements for testing the effectiveness of the safety equipment are laid out in the maintenance regime for each train type. The train owner, operator or maintenance contractor is responsible for ensuring that the appropriate arrangements are undertaken.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has held with Railtrack on the subject of cracked or faulty railway lines; what assurances he has secured from Railtrack; and if he will make a statement. [135932]

Mr. Hill: There are regular meetings between Ministers and Railtrack at which a variety of issues have been discussed, including the issue of broken rails.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what investigations are being undertaken on the safety of the railway track in *(a)* north-east Scotland and *(b)* elsewhere in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [135934]

Mr. Hill: HSE's Principal Inspector of Railways in Scotland met with the Senior Railtrack Management on 25 October 2000. Railtrack Scotland has carried out visual examinations on sites with track already identified as needing replacement, and are in the process of establishing a programme for other sites. Railtrack is taking whatever action is necessary to identify all track defects and where they cannot be remedied speedily, the necessary mitigation measures (i.e. speed restrictions, increased inspection, traffic limitations) will be implemented to maintain the safety of passengers. HSE is also meeting with senior management at Railtrack HQ on national initiatives being taken to maintain the infrastructure.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he was first advised by the shadow Strategic Rail Authority of the extent of the problems with broken rails; and if he will make a statement. [135933]

Mr. Hill: In its first interim report into the Hatfield derailment on 20 October, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) informed Ministers that Railtrack were concerned about a specific form of rolling contact fatigue—sometimes referred to as gauge corner cracking—and that as a result had imposed emergency speed restrictions across the railway system. However, Ministers have been aware of the general issue of broken rails for a considerable amount of time, including the concerns raised by the HSE and the Rail Regulator.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many broken rails were discovered on the railway network in Scotland in *(a)* 1990 and *(b)* in each year from 1995 to date; and if he will make a statement. [135935]

Mr. Hill: The Health and Safety Executive does not hold records on broken rails dating back to 1990. Figures for broken rails based on geographical areas supplied to HSE's Railway Inspectorate by railway operators commenced from 1 April 1996. The number of broken rails for Scotland for the period of 1 April 1996 to 31 March 2000 are shown in the following table.

Broken rails in Scotland 1996–97 to 1999–2000

	Total broken rails in Scotland	
Year	*Railtrack*	*Glasgow Underground*
1996–97	57	2
1997–98	49	0
1998–99	88	0
1999–2000	80	0

Road Deaths

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people were killed on the roads in the week beginning Sunday 10 September and in the same week of September 1999. [135094]

Mr. Hill: No information is yet available regarding 2000 accident data. The figures for the days September 10–16 for 1998 and 1999 are as shown:

1998—67

1999—62.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people were killed on the roads in each of the last three years for which figures are available in the area of the Essex Police Authority. [135101]

Mr. Hill: The number of people killed on the roads in the area of the Essex Police authority in each of the last three years for which figures are available are as follows:

1997—89

1998—76

1999—106.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people were killed on the road in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [135099]

Mr. Hill: The number of people killed on the roads in each of the last three years for which figures are available are as follows:

1997—3,599

1998—3,421

1999—3,423.

Housing Stock Transfers

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list *(a)* the three most senior members of staff employed by registered social landlords that have taken over former local authority housing stock and *(b)* their previous employers; [134732]

(2) if he will list *(a)* the chairmen of registered social landlords that have taken over former local authority housing stock and *(b)* their current occupation and relevant interests. [134733]

Mr. Mullin: A list of the chairs and two most senior members of staff of registered social landlords (RSLs) which have taken over former local authority housing stock has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Information on the previous employers of senior staff in these RSLs, the third most senior member of staff, and the current occupation and relevant interests of the chairs of these RSLs is not held centrally.

Disabled Drivers

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress on reviewing the definition of very exceptional cases in the context of the application of the second EC Directive on the driving licence relating to the renewal of licences for drivers suffering from diabetes mellitus and requiring insulin treatment; and what account is being taken of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in this review. [134572]

Mr. Hill: At their meeting on 4 October, the Secretary of State's Honorary Medical Advisory Panel on Driving and Diabetes agreed that the term "exceptional case" should be redefined to mean applicants for C1 entitlement (vehicles of between 3.5 to 7.5 tonnes) with good diabetic control and no significant complications. The panel will meet again on 8 November to finalise the new definition, after which public consultation will begin with a view to having the legislative changes in place by spring 2001.

There is no question of conflict with the Disability Discrimination Act.

Railways (Public Investment)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much public money has been paid to *(a)* the railway operating companies and *(b)* Railtrack in each year since privatisation; and what annual payments are to be made in future years. [135432]

Mr. Hill: Since privatisation, Support for Passenger Rail Services (SPRS) has been paid by the Franchising Director to passenger train operating companies (TOCs). Also, certain TOCs receive income from Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) for rail passenger services in major conurbations. In addition, freight operating companies (FOCs) receive freight grant payments from my Department.

The table provides details, for each year since the TOCs and FOCs were created, of SPRS and PTE payments to the TOCs, and freight grant payments to the FOCs. The figures for 2000–01 are estimated outturns.

Cash prices

£ million

	Payments		
	SPRS	*PTE*	*Freight grant*
1994–95	1,783	346	—
1995–96	1,669	362	—
1996–97	1,809	291	12
1997–98	1,429	375	21
1998–99	1,196	337	19
1999–2000	1,033	312	17
2000–01	913	280	16

Since privatisation, no public money has been paid direct to Railtrack, but the company's profitability is contingent on public money. Some 90 per cent. of Railtrack's income is paid to the company by TOCs and FOCs in access charges, a substantial proportion of which are supported by public money.

The precise size of annual payments in future years will depend on negotiations which the Franchising Director has not yet completed with TOCs and others. Under existing franchises, total subsidy to TOCs is set to fall from some £1.2 billion this year to less than £900 million by 2002–03. Also, the Franchising Director has approved a number of projects under the Rail Passenger Partnership (RPP) scheme, involving commitments to pay some £12 million to TOCs. He is currently considering 23 other possible RPP projects, with potential to generate payments of an additional £53 million. The Ten-Year Plan for Transport provides for substantial extra Government funding to halt the decline in revenue subsidy and for direct payments of renewals capital grant to Railtrack for both passengers and freight. In addition, the Plan provides for a Rail Modernisation Fund of £7 billion to support enhancements of the rail network.

Road Haulage

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the principal elements in the costs of a typical road haulage business in *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* the latest date for which figures are available, indicating in each year the percentage of turnover accounted for by those costs. [135408]

Mr. Hill: The Government do not routinely collect information on the operating costs of road hauliers.

Planning Officers

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he plans to take with regard to planning officers who take employment with *(a)* developers and *(b)* applicants with whom they have dealt. [135663]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government have no powers to intervene in these issues. Local authorities are independent employers and the terms and conditions of their staff, including future employment, are determined in their contracts.

Council Tax Benefit

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to help tenants in social housing whose homes have been designated Band F, G or H and who are thereby ineligible for Council Tax Benefit. [135828]

Ms Armstrong: People on low incomes (whether social tenants or otherwise) who occupy dwellings in Bands F, G and H are eligible to claim Council Tax Benefit. Those who received Council Tax Benefit on or before 31 March 1998 and continue to meet the continuity requirements are entitled to have up to 100 per cent. of their council tax liability met through benefit regardless

of the valuation band of their home. New claimants after that date who live in dwellings in Bands F, G and H can receive benefit up to the maximum amount payable for Band E dwellings. We have no plans to alter this arrangement, which was introduced to ensure that taxpayers do not fully subsidise the costs of people living in the highest value properties. This is consistent with our policy of not supporting such properties on Income Support where help for mortgage interest in new cases is also restricted. However, we are aware of the concerns that remain with this measure and are continuing to monitor the effects of the restriction.

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much funding has been allocated for the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme for 2000–01. [135883]

Mr. Meacher: The budget for the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme for 2000–01 is £121,857,000.

Soil Protection Strategy

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish for public consultation the Soil Protection Strategy recommended by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution in its 1996 report, 'Sustainable Use of Soil'. [136011]

Mr. Meacher: Soon.

Parish Polls

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the trigger level for the holding of parish polls. [135740]

Ms Armstrong *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* We have no plans to alter the legislative requirements for the holding of parish polls.

Fitness to Drive

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review current arrangements for ascertaining the medical fitness of older drivers. [135734]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* These matters are kept under constant review. The benefits of any changes to medical requirements would be assessed in the context of overall mobility and safety benefits for older people and other road users.

We have commissioned research from Manchester University into the driving behaviour of older people. The project is due to be completed by the end of November and a report will be published in due course.

Salisbury District Council

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many staff were employed by Salisbury District Council in *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1999 and *(c)* on 1 October 2000. [136044]

Ms Armstrong: The information that is available is as follows:

Salisbury District Council

Number of employees

	12 June 1998	*9 June 2000*
Full-time employees	477	418
Part-time employees	91	73
Estimated whole-time equivalents	518	451

Sources:
Joint Staffing Watch (1998), Employers' Organisation (2000).

Road Traffic Reduction Act 1997

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has received Road Traffic Reduction Act reports from local traffic authorities as required by the Road Traffic Reduction Act 1997. [136774]

Mr. Hill: I have received reports under the Road Traffic Reduction Act 1997 from local traffic authorities in England, as required under the Act. Copies of the reports have been laid before the Parliament and placed in the Libraries of the House.

Parish Councils (Reserves)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the recommended level is of reserves required to be held by a parish council; and if he will make a statement. [136179]

Ms Armstrong: The Government do not make recommendations on the level of reserves to be held by parish councils.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) published non-statutory guidance on standards of financial reporting for parish councils following the laying of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 1996.

The CIPFA guidance does not make recommendations on levels of reserves either, but does set out reporting requirements and guidance relating to reserves for small (budgeted annual income of less than £5,000), medium-sized (£5,000-£500,000) and large (£500,000 plus) parish councils.

Ross-on-Wye Council (Finances)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has received the return from Ross-on-Wye Town Council on the finances of the council; and if he will make a statement. [136178]

Ms Armstrong: Ross-on-Wye Town Council is a Parish Council, rather than a District Council, and as such does not make financial returns to this department.

Chicklade Bypass

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will build a bypass for the village of Chicklade on the A303(T) in Wiltshire. [134301]

Mr. Hill: The A303 Chicklade Bottom-Mere Improvement is one of the schemes currently being considered under the London to South West and South Wales Multi-Modal Study. The outcome of the study will inform the Regional Planning Body's consideration of transport infrastructure requirements in preparing a review of the Regional Transport Strategy, currently contained in emerging Regional Planning Guidance for the South West, including the need for improvements to the trunk road network. I expect the study to report towards the end of next year.

Draft Water Bill

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Government plans to publish the draft Water Bill; and if he will make a statement. [136776]

Mr. Meacher: I will publish a draft Water Bill for public consultation on Monday 6 November. The draft Bill will have three main elements: first, it will contain provisions to improve the management of water through reforms to the abstraction licensing system and by promoting greater water conservation by water companies; second, it will re-introduce the regulatory reform provisions for water that were removed from the Utilities Bill in March 2000. These clauses have been updated since then, mainly to reflect any relevant amendments made to the equivalent energy provisions now in the Utilities Act 2000. The overall aim is to put the consumer at the heart of the regulatory process and to make regulation more open and accountable; and third, the draft Bill will contain a number of other useful but minor improvements to the regulatory systems for water and reservoir safety.

The draft Bill includes provisions to increase the maximum penalty for abstraction and impounding offences and for supplying water unfit for human consumption from £5,000 to £20,000. This reflects the importance the Government attaches to ensuring appropriate fines for water offences. Unlimited fines are available in the crown courts.

The draft Bill will also give new powers to the regulators to fine water companies up to 10 per cent. of their turnover for breaches of their conditions of appointment, or for failure to achieve prescribed standards of performance.

We are also consulting on measures to ensure that customers have easy access to reliable comparative information on water company performance. We are working with the water industry with the aim of developing a pilot scheme. We are also consulting when we publish the draft water bill on introducing any necessary legislation to require companies to provide comparative performance information to customers.

Copies of the draft Bill and covering consultation paper, and an accompanying publication setting out the Government's Regulatory Impact Assessment, Environmental Impact Assessment and a Policy Appraisal for Equal Treatment will be laid before the House at 11am on Monday 6 November.

CABINET OFFICE

Risk Management Frameworks

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many Departments produced risk management frameworks relating to their Statement of Internal Control by September; and if she will place copies in the Library. [135490]

Mr. Stringer: Departments and public bodies will be required to produce Statements of Internal Control from the financial years 2001–02 onwards. The first Statements will be published in 2002. As a separate exercise, Departments and Agencies that are responsible for managing significant risks faced by the public are drawing up and publishing the framework and procedures they use for reaching decisions on the risks for which they are responsible. Copies of these will be placed in the Library. As of 31 October, risk frameworks had been published by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Ministry of Defence, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Environment Agency, the Department for Education and Employment, the Food Standards Agency, the Department of Health, the Health and Safety Executive, the Inland Revenue and the Office for National Statistics.

Pharmacy Controls

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent studies her Department has undertaken on the economic and financial effects of pharmacy *(a)* licence regulation and *(b)* planning permission. [134505]

Mr. Stringer: The Performance and Innovation Unit of the Cabinet Office published in December 1999 a project on rural economies, which discussed the implications of planning policy for rural economies. Additionally, the independent Better Regulation Task Force, for which I am sponsor Minister, published in June 2000 a case study of increasing regulation in the hotel and restaurant industry. Among other things, it looked at whether there were any barriers in the planning system to the productivity of this sector.

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many people are employed in the Performance and Innovation Unit. [135387]

Mr. Stringer: As of 31 October 2000, there are 31 people employed in the Performance and Innovation Unit.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

House Purchases

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to be able to publish the final research report on the trials of the new system for home buying and selling. [135830]

Mr. Lock: We are planning to announce the results of the seller's information pack pilot at a conference in Bristol on 24 November. A short report and a summary of the main findings and conclusions will be published on that date. A full research report is expected to be published in December.

Magistrates Courts Service

Mr. Hope: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he will publish the Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of the magistrates courts service; and if he will make a statement. [136775]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor has today placed copies of the Chief Inspector's Annual Report in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Chief Inspector reports a noticeable improvement in overall proficiency across the service. Magistrates courts committees have faced up to hard decisions and shown determination in executing them. While further improvements are needed, such as in the management of performance through the monitoring of suitable indicators, magistrates courts committees are demonstrating an increasing willingness to think strategically.

Although most MCCs continued to show significant weaknesses in managing performance in case administration, all magistrates courts committees inspected achieved average or better than average case completion times. There were also some encouraging signs of recent improvement. The Chief Inspector also noted that there had been good inter-agency work on the planning and implementation of the new Narey procedures and Youth Court Joint Performance Improvement Plans.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on developments in the drafting of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. [135376]

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason a draft Charter of Fundamental Rights is being negotiated by EU member states. [135574]

Mr. Vaz: In June 1999, the Conclusions of the Cologne European Council called for a Charter of Fundamental Rights to be drawn up to make those rights more visible. It was agreed that the Charter would be drafted by a body called the Convention, consisting of 15 member states representatives, 16 MEPs, 30 national parliamentarians and one Commissioner.

The Convention met regularly from December 1999 to October 2000. It circulated a final draft on 2 October. This was discussed by Heads of Government at the Biarritz Informal Council on 13–14 October. They agreed that the Charter should be proclaimed as a political declaration at the Nice European Council in December. Copies of the Charter text have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Government strongly supports the Charter. People need to know their rights. And the EU Institutions need to respect them. The Charter will help on both counts. It sets out fundamental rights and principles that the EU Institutions should respect when going about their daily business, and it promotes the visibility and accessibility of those rights.

The Charter is not legally binding. It is addressed to the EU Institutions, and to member states only when they are implementing Union law (Article 51(1)). It does not establish any new power or task for the Community or the Union or modify powers and tasks defined by the Treaties (Article 51(2)). It does not create any new powers for the European Court of Justice.

Individual Charter articles should be read in the context of the declaration as a whole, including the horizontal provisions. The meaning and scope of articles derived from the European Convention on Human Rights shall be the same as that in the corresponding ECHR articles (Article 52(3)). Charter articles based on EC/EU Treaty rights shall be exercised under the conditions and within the limits defined by those Treaties (Article 52(2)). Other articles make clear that the rights they concern are given effect only to the extent that they have effect in national laws and practices.

The Government believe the Charter will be good for Britain and good for Europe. Its successful negotiation is a vindication of our policy of positive engagement with our European partners.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who are the members of the Praesidium referred to in Convent 45, Draft Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; and what are its powers. [135523]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave today, columns 555–56W, to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) and to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow).

The Praesidium was chaired by Roman Herzog, the Chairman of the Convention. The European Commission was represented by Antonio Vitorino, Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs.

The three Vice-Chairs were Inigo Mendes de Vigo (European Parliament), Gunnar Jansson (national parliamentarians) and Paavo Nikula followed by Bacelar de Vasconcelos and Guy Braibant (Finnish, Portuguese and French Presidencies).

EU Matters

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the number of European commissioners per member state; [135092]

(2) if he will make a statement on his policy towards changes in majority voting in the EU. [135089]

Mr. Vaz: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the White Paper laid before the House on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 769–83, which sets out the Government's position.

Enhanced Co-operation

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on reinforced co-operation in the EU. [135382]

Mr. Vaz: As the Prime Minister made clear in his speech in Warsaw on 6 October, this Government support the principle of enhanced co-operation in an enlarged Union. But this must be subject to important safeguards. Enhanced co-operation must remain open to all at any stage; it must not undermine the single market or other common policies and it must not lead to a hard core in which some member states create shared policies and institutions from which others are in practice excluded.

EU Legal Personality

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on proposals from the European Parliament relating to a legal personality for the European Union. [135385]

Mr. Vaz: The issue of EU legal personality has been touched on in discussions at the Intergovernmental Conference. However a majority of member states, including the United Kingdom, were not in favour of this being added to the IGC agenda.

European Federation

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his policy on a European Federation with a constitution. [135383]

Mr. Vaz: The Government have made clear their opposition to a federal superstate. We want a United Europe of States, not a United States of Europe. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Prime Minister's speech in Warsaw on 6 October. I have sent him a copy of this speech today.

Euro

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the result of the Danish referendum on the euro. [135378]

Mr. Vaz: As the Prime Minister has said, this decision is a matter for the Danish people and does not change the Government's position. We are in favour, in principle, of joining a successful single currency but in practice the five economic tests have to be met. Should Government and Parliament recommend joining, the final decision should be for the British people in a referendum.

European Common Foreign and Security Policy/NATO

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the relationship between European common Foreign and Security Policy and NATO. [135384]

Mr. Vaz: NATO is the cornerstone of the UK's defence. NATO plays a major role in crisis management, as in Bosnia and Kosovo. In pursuit of its common Foreign and Security Policy, the European Union is developing its capacity to undertake military crisis management operations where the alliance as a whole is not engaged. More capable European nations will strengthen NATO as well as the European Union.

For European Defence to be effective, EU activity needs to be underpinned by arrangements for consultation, co-operation and transparency with NATO and for EU access to NATO assets. Negotiations between the EU and NATO to secure these arrangements are under way.

EU Economic and Social Policies

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on proposals by the European Parliament relating to the European Union's powers in relation to economic, social and employment policies. [135090]

Mr. Vaz: In its resolution of March 2000, the European Parliament proposed a number of changes to the European Union's powers in relation to economic, social and employment policies, for discussion at the intergovernmental conference. Not all aspects of the European Parliament's proposals have been taken up by the Conference. As far as the proposals relate to qualified majority voting, the Government made their policy clear in their White Paper "IGC: Reform for Enlargement" of February 2000.

Southern Cameroons National Council

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is towards the Southern Cameroons National Council; and if he will make a statement. [135261]

Mr. Hain: As an Anglophone organisation committed to secession from Cameroon, parts of the SCNC have used armed violence in pursuit of their aims. We have pressed the Cameroon authorities to ensure that the rights of all, whether Anglophone or Francophone, be respected. We urge all groups in Cameroon to work together to find peaceful and lawful solutions to their problems. We deplore all violent activity.

EU Institutional Changes

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on EU institutional changes affecting *(a)* the Commission, *(b)* the Parliament, *(c)* the Court of Justice and *(d)* the Court of Auditors. [135397]

Mr. Vaz: I refer my hon. Friend to the White Paper laid before the House on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 769–83, which clearly sets out the Government's position toward the institutional changes currently being discussed at the intergovernmental conference.

EU Enlargement

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress being made in EU enlargement negotiations with *(a)* Bulgaria, *(b)* Latvia, *(c)* Lithuania, *(d)* Malta, *(e)* Romania and *(f)* Slovakia. [135390]

Mr. Vaz: Accession negotiations with the six countries listed were launched on 15 February 2000. For the purpose of negotiations, the "acquis communautaire" (ie the body of

law and practice to which all member states subscribe) of the European Union is divided into 31 "chapters". By 24 October, the countries concerned had "opened" (ie started negotiations on) between eight and 13 chapters each. Malta had "provisionally closed" (ie no further negotiations are required at this stage) 10 chapters; Slovakia nine; Latvia and Lithuania seven each, Romania and Bulgaria six each. These countries are expected provisionally to close a number of further chapters at the Deputies Conferences scheduled for 16 November and at the Ministerial Conferences on 21 November.

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the state of the EU enlargement negotiations in respect of *(a)* Cyprus, *(b)* Czech Republic, *(c)* Estonia, *(d)* Hungary, *(e)* Poland and *(f)* Slovenia. [135391]

Mr. Vaz: Accession negotiations with the six countries listed were launched in March 1998. For the purpose of negotiations, the "acquis communautaire" (ie the body of law and practice to which all member states subscribe) of the European Union is divided into 31 "chapters". By 5 October, the countries concerned had "opened" (ie started negotiations on) 29 (out of 31) chapters. Cyprus had "provisionally closed" (ie no further negotiations are required at this stage) 16 chapters, Estonia 14, Hungary and the Czech Republic 13 each, Slovenia 12 and Poland 11. These countries are expected provisionally to close a number of further chapters at the Deputies Conferences scheduled for 14 November and at the Ministerial Conferences on 5 December.

New Agenda Coalition

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his policy on the New Agenda Coalition at the United Nations General Assembly and their efforts to get agreement on multilateral nuclear disarmament. [135399]

Mr. Vaz: The Government were pleased to have reached agreement with the New Agenda Coalition, and with the other states party to the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), on a forward-looking agenda for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament at the 2000 NPT Review Conference in May.

The Government wish to see that agenda reinforced at this year's United Nations General Assembly. To that end, we are currently engaged in discussions with the Coalition in New York on the text of their draft resolution.

Landmine Clearance Programme

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made with the landmine clearance programme in Bosnia-Herzegovina; and when he expects the operation to be completed. [135216]

Mr. Vaz: It is difficult to obtain precise figures for demining progress to date in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But NATO-led Stabilisation Force (SFOR) estimates indicate that, up to 1999, 50,000 devices (mines and unexploded ordnance) had been cleared; official figures from the local Mine Action Centres suggest that over 12,600 devices have so far been cleared in 1999 and 2000. The overall system of demining in Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently under review, in an effort to accelerate the process; but it is not possible to give an estimated end-date for the operation.

Colombian Anti-narcotics Police

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what *(a)* financial support and *(b)* logistical, personnel or training support the Government have provided to the Colombian Anti-Narcotics Police in the last 10 years. [135114]

Mr. Battle: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office have not provided financial support to the Colombian Anti-Narcotics Police (ANP).

Some training has been provided to the ANP in the past ten years. This has included military training, seaport profiling and vehicle search techniques. We have also provided equipment to the ANP in support of this training, which has included rummage kits and communications equipment.

Plan Colombia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects the UK and its European counterparts to make a final decision on the allocation of funds for Plan Colombia. [135110]

Mr. Battle: The European Commission announced at the second consultative group meeting on support for the peace process in Colombia, held in Bogota on 24 October, that the EU would contribute 105 million euro to Colombia over the period 2000–06. In addition, the Commission pledged to continue to support humanitarian projects in Colombia, current expenditure of which is around 10 million euro per annum.

The EU Presidency made clear at the meeting that the European package is in support of the peace process; defence of human rights and international humanitarian law; help for victims of violence; protection of biodiversity and the environment, and support for regional co-operation.

Bolivia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the recent violence in the Chapare region of Bolivia. [135111]

Mr. Battle: The political situation in Bolivia has stabilised following a period of social unrest and violent tension in late September and early October. Protests in the Chapare centred on the Bolivian Government's plans to eradicate illegal coca crops, in line with a five year counter-drug action plan.

An agreement was reached with coca growers on 14 October and the situation in the Chapare has stabilised, although there have been sporadic outbreaks of violence since then. The agreement provides for better implementation and control of alternative development projects and the establishment of a human rights commission to investigate violence and deaths in the Chapare since 1998. The Bolivian Government has also shelved plans to build three military barracks in the Chapare.

EU Energy Policy

Mr. Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on proposals by the European Parliament relating to the European Union's energy policy. [135088]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

I am not aware of any specific proposals in this area.

Israel

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what investigations are being undertaken to ensure that arms exports to Israel are not being used for internal repression or external aggression. [135555]

Mr. Hain: We have no evidence to suggest that equipment licensed for export by this Government has been used by Israeli Forces against civilians in the Occupied Territories during the recent events. We are very concerned about the recent violence in the Occupied Territories and in Israel and continue to monitor the situation closely.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals for action Her Majesty's Government are evaluating in its role as one of the High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Convention to monitor Israeli violations of the IVth Geneva Convention in the Occupied Territories. [135473]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners monitor the situation in Israel and the Occupied Territories closely through our diplomatic missions. We are also in close contact with the International Committee of the Red Cross and relevant non-governmental organisations.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action his Department is taking to ensure that no British equipment is being used by Israeli forces in *(a)* helicopter attacks and *(b)* other actions against civilians in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. [135472]

Mr. Hain: We have no evidence that equipment licensed for export by this Government has been used by Israeli forces against civilians in the Occupied Territories during the recent violence. We would be concerned if such evidence came to light and continue to monitor the situation closely.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government have made to the Israeli Government about the re-establishment at Mitzpe Hagit in the West Bank of an illegal settlement. [135471]

Mr. Hain: The Government's position remains that all settlements are illegal under international law and undermine the peace process. This applies to Mitzpe Hagit, as to other settlements. The Israeli Government is well aware of our position.

Council of the European Union

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list *(a)* the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for November and *(b)* the major European Union events for the period between 30 November and April 2001. [136810]

Mr. Vaz: To date we have received the detailed agendas for the following Council meetings in November:

7 November—Brussels—ECOFIN Council

Adoption of the agenda

Approval of the list of "A" items

Follow-up to the Lisbon European Council meeting

Adoption of the joint Council-Commission report assessing European financial instruments for risk capital.

Discussion of the Commission proposal for implementation of the action plan for risk capital and monitoring indicators.

Adoption of the report on structural performance indicators.

Discussion of the EPC progress report on the financial and microeconomic impact of aging.

Preparation for the Nice European Council meeting (poss.) Exchange-rate strategies of countries applying for membership.

Other business

7 November—Brussels—Environment

Adoption of the agenda

Approval of the list of "A" items(*)

Community strategy on climate change strategy debate prior to COP6/preparation for COP6

Draft Council conclusions

Commission progress report on the European climate change programme

Other business(*) Including in particular the Council conclusions on the negotiations for a legally binding international instrument to apply international measures to certain persistent organic pollutants (POPs).

9 November—Brussels—Education/Youth

Adoption of the agenda

(poss.) Approval of the list of "A" items

(a) Mobility

Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on mobility within the Community for students, persons undergoing training, volunteers, teachers and trainers.

Political agreement

5600/00 EDUC 8 SOC 28 JEUN 3 CODEC 59

12020/00 CODEC 736 EDUC 133 SOC 318 JEUN 53

(b) Mobility Action Plan

Adoption of a Resolution

Preliminary draft report on future objectives of education systems

Presentation by the Commission and discussion

Follow-up to the Leiden seminar on open co-ordination and benchmarking as applied to European education systems

Information from the Presidency and the Commission

Contribution to the Luxembourg process

Adoption of a contribution from the Council (Education) to the Council (Employment and Social Policy)

Social agenda

Adoption of a contribution of the Council (Education) to the Council (Employment and Social Policy)

Follow-up to the meeting of the EU-Latin American Ministers for Higher Education in Paris on 3 November 2000

Information from the Presidency

Memorandum on life-long learning

Presentation by the Commission

Commission information points

(a) Progress reached in the implementation of the European Year of Languages 2001

(b) Renewal of the United States-Canada-EU co-operation agreements in the field of education and training

(c) Celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Eurydice information network and of the 25th anniversary of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)

(d) Information from the Presidency on the outcome of the Blois seminar entitled "Learn the history of Europe" (13–15 October 2000)

Young people and Europe: what follow-up measures should be taken following consultations with young people in Europe? (public debate)

Implementation of the YOUTH programme

Information from the Commission and exchange of views

Social inclusion of young people: Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the member states meeting within the Council

Adoption

Protection of the young involved in sport—Information from the Commission and exchange of views

Measures to combat racism in the young

Contribution by the German delegation

Other business

16 November—Brussels—Research Council

European Space research

Commission communication on the realisation of the European space research programme

Lisbon follow up. Work in progress on:

Benchmarking (indicators), infrastructures and research, science and society, plan of action e-europe

Exchange of views

Option of council resolution

Commission paper on European space strategy

Presentation by the Commission

Exchange of views

Adoption of council resolution

Negotiating mandate relating to legal entity of the ITER

For Approval (false B points)

Other Business

Information from the Commission on 'The Innovation of a knowledge based economy'

Presidency information on the academy of sciences-Alpha Galileo report

In addition, there will be the following Council meetings:

3—Brussels—Social Affairs Council

No agenda yet available

10—Brussels—Development Council

No agenda yet available

15–16—Brussels—Euro-Med Ministerial

No agenda yet available

17—Brussels—Fisheries Council

No agenda yet available

20–21—Brussels—General Affairs Council

No agenda yet available

20–21—Brussels—Agriculture Council

No agenda yet available

23—Brussels—Culture/Audio-visual Council

No agenda yet available

23–24—Brussels—Budget Council

No agenda yet available

27–28—Brussels—ECOFIN—Council

No agenda yet available

27–28—Brussels—Labour and Social Affairs Council

No agenda yet available

30—Brussels—Justice and Home Affairs Council

No agenda yet available

30—Brussels—Internal Market/Consumer/Tourism Council

No agenda yet available

The following are the principle events in the EU between 30 November and April 2001 (certain relevant events are also included: the list is based on the information available at the date of issue:

Date	*Venue*	*Event*
December		
1	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
3	Brussels	IGC Ministerial Conclave
4–5	Brussels	General Affairs Council
4	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
5	Brussels	Energy and Industry Council
7–9	Nice	European Council
11	Brussels	Health Council
11–15	Strasbourg	EP Plenary
14–15	Brussels	Fisheries Council
18–19	Brussels	Environment Council
18	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
18	Washington	EU/United States Summit
19–20	Brussels	Agriculture Council
19	Ottawa	EU/Canada Summit
20–21	Brussels	Transport Council
22	Brussels	Telecommunications Council
January		
12	Brussels	Fisheries Council (possible)
19	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
22–23	Brussels	General Affairs Council
29	Brussels	Budget Council (possible)
February		
8–9	Brussels	JHA Information Council
12	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
12	Brussels	Education/Youth Council (possible)
12	Brussels	Research Council
15–17	Brussels	Informal Employment/Telecommunications Council
19–20	Brussels	Agriculture Council
26–27	Brussels	General Affairs Council
March		
6	Brussels	Employment and Social Affairs Council
8	Brussels	Environment Council
12	Brussels	ECOFIN Council
12	Brussels	Internal Market/Consumer Council
15	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
16	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
19	Brussels	Agriculture Council
19	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20	Brussels	General Affairs Council
20–21	Brussels	Fisheries Council (possible)
23–24	Stockholm	European Council
31–1	Brussels	Meeting of Environment Ministers
April		
5–6	Brussels	Transport/Telecommunications Council
8–10	Brussels	General Affairs Council
8–10	Brussels	Agriculture Council (Informal)
24–25	Brussels	Agriculture Council

International Criminal Court

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the Government will ratify the statute creating the International Criminal Court; and if he will make a statement. [135530]

Mr. Hain: The UK will ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as soon as the necessary legislation is in place. The International Criminal Court Bill was published in draft on 25 August for consultation and will be introduced as soon as the Parliamentary timetable allows.

War Memorials

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list by UK diplomatic mission the sums disbursed on *(a)* British and *(b)* Commonwealth war memorials in (i) 1998 and (ii) 1999. [134303]

Mr. Hain: No funds were disbursed by UK diplomatic missions on British and Commonwealth war memorials during 1998 and 1999.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Commonwealth Education Ministers (Conference)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what *(a)* ministerial and *(b)* official representation is planned at the 14 Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers to be held at Halifax, Nova Scotia for 27 to 30 November. [134425]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The delegation is currently being finalised. It will include myself and Education Ministers from four overseas territories. The devolved Administrations will make their own decisions on possible representation. The Department for International Development also hopes to be represented at ministerial level. The Ministers will be accompanied by officials from the relevant Departments; by Sir Tim Lankester, Deputy Chair of the British Council; and by Dr. Geoffrey Caston, Chairman of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the United Kingdom. A number of other UK bodies and Commonwealth bodies based in the UK will also be attending, either as observers to the ministerial conference or as delegates to the parallel symposium and trade fair.

Pre-school Playgroups

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to provide funding for pre-school playgroup places for three-year-olds in Buckinghamshire. [134581]

Ms Hodge: Details of the funding we will be making available to Buckinghamshire local education authority to fund places in 2001–02 will be announced shortly. Figures are not available for the number of places specifically funded in pre-school playgroups.

From April 2000, Buckinghamshire local education authority were allocated £144,000 to create a total of 124 new, free, part-time early education places in 2000–01 for three-year-olds in all settings. This was increased in September 2000 by £193,000 to fund a further 250 places.

The allocation of places at a local level is the responsibility of the Buckinghamshire early years development and child care partnership. At a national level, approximately 80 per cent. of the new places made available for three-year-olds are in the private, voluntary and independent sectors.

Since May 1997, we have increased the number of early education places for three and four-year-olds nationally by 120,000. Already, all four-year-olds in Buckinghamshire have access to an early education place. By September 2004, all three-year-olds will also have that.

Mrs. Marjorie Evans

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many letters he has received in support of Mrs. Marjorie Evans. [134708]

Ms Estelle Morris: My Department has received 85 letters in support of Marjorie Evans.

Homophobic Bullying

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what evidence his Department has obtained of homophobic bullying resulting from the retention of section 28. [134717]

Jacqui Smith: Section 28 does not apply to schools, only to the activities of local education authorities.

The 1998 report "Playing it Safe", commissioned by Stonewall and the Terence Higgins Trust, and produced by the University of London Institute of Education, for the first time detailed the extent of homophobic bullying in schools.

University of Buckingham

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the work of the University of Buckingham. [134796]

Mr. Wicks: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carries out reviews of the effectiveness of institutional arrangements for the management of the quality and standards of academic provision in all higher education institutions that receive public funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and therefore subscribe to the Agency. The University of Buckingham is an independent university which does not receive any public funding from the HEFCE. There are, therefore, no requirements for any assessments of the work of the University of Buckingham to be undertaken by the QAA. However, the University of Buckingham is a voluntary subscriber to the QAA for academic quality audit.

An academic quality audit of the University of Buckingham was carried out by the former Higher Education Quality Council in the 1992–93 academic year, with the report being published in March 1993. The audit scheduled by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) for the autumn term 2000 has had to be

postponed. The next academic quality audit of the University of Buckingham is not now expected to take place until 2002.

Stakeholder Pension

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to offer teachers a stakeholder pension. [134372]

Mr. Wicks: All teachers have access to the good quality range of benefits provided by the teachers pension scheme. Employers will not, therefore, need to offer teachers a stakeholder pension. All employers should, however, be considering whether they need to offer access to a stakeholder scheme to any of their staff to ensure that no employee is denied the opportunity to make adequate pension provision.

British Bee Keepers Association

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will offer financial support to those studying for the British Bee Keepers Association's basic exam as a vocational qualification. [135689]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* Vocational qualifications eligible for funding by the Further Education Funding Council are approved by the Secretary of State on the basis of advice received from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Bodies seeking recognition of their awards for such purposes should make application to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 83 Piccadilly, London W1J 8QA.

School Rolls

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many middle schools in England have fewer than 100 pupils on roll. [134300]

Ms Estelle Morris: Figures from the January 2000 schools census show that there were no middle schools, primary deemed or secondary deemed with less than 100 pupils. Information on middle schools by size has recently been published in the statistical volume "Statistics of Education Schools in England 2000". This is available from the Library or alternatively can be accessed on the Department's statistical website www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much it has cost so far to administer the backdated winter fuel payments scheme, including the cost of the telephone helpline; and what the estimate is for the final cost of the scheme. [134560]

Angela Eagle: The administration of winter fuel payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. David Willetts, dated 1 November 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how much it has cost so far to administer the backdated winter fuel payment scheme, including the cost of the telephone helpline; and what the latest estimate is for the final cost of the scheme.

I can confirm that the cost so far in administering the winter fuel payment scheme is £10 million, which includes the cost of the telephone helpline. The estimated final cost of administering the scheme is in the order of £22.5 million.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many households in the Lewes constituency benefit from *(a)* the winter heating allowance, *(b)* the Christmas bonus to the basic state pension and *(c)* the free TV licence for those aged 75 years or over for the last year for which figures are available; and what was the combined value of these to older people in the constituency. [135327]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of Social Security is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Alexis Cleveland. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 1 November 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many households in the Lewes constituency benefit from (a) the winter fuel heating allowance (b) the Christmas bonus added to the basic state pension and (c) the free TV licence for those aged 75 years or over for the last year for which figures are available. Additionally to advise what was the combined value of these to older people in the constituency.

The information is not available in the format requested. I can advise you that in the last year recorded Winter Fuel payments were paid to 21,000 pensioners in the Lewes constituency in total. Of these 11,500 received a payment of £50 and 9,500 received £100.

In addition Christmas bonuses of £10 were issued to 21,000 pensioners.

The free TV licence scheme does not come into effect until 1 November 2000. It is known that there are 10,000 persons over the age of 75 in the Lewes constituency but as the makeup of the households involved is not known I am unable to advise how many would qualify for a free licence.

Therefore, it is not possible to say what the combined value of these would be for each individual pensioner in your constituency as conditions of entitlement are governed by the pensioner's individual circumstances.

However I am able to advise you that from these three payments combined the maximum amount available to a pensioner over the age of 75 years who resided on his/her own would be a combination of Winter Fuel payment (£150), Christmas bonus (£10) and free colour TV licence (£104) totalling £264.

I hope this is helpful.

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of the City of Edinburgh Council. [136915]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of the City of Edinburgh Council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report provides recommendations aimed at helping the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as their counter fraud activities.

The BFI reports that the council needs to do much more to improve benefits administration and its counter fraud efforts. Inspectors found the council had no strategic approach to combating fraud and error and there were serious weaknesses in internal security.

The report notes concerns about the standards of verification being applied to claims and the BFI found there was potential for better use to be made of management information.

Inspectors found that the approach of the Counter Fraud Unit had been mainly reactive and the poor quality of casework had brought about premature closure of investigations.

Some of the recommendations made after the trial inspection in 1997 had been implemented, including a physical merger of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit administration. The report also notes a general improvement in the interface arrangements with the Benefits Agency.

I am now considering the report on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will be asking the council for their proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of the London Borough of Harrow. [136916]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report in respect of the London Borough of Harrow was published on 12 September 2000, during the parliamentary recess. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report provides recommendations aimed at helping the council address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as their respective counter fraud activities.

The BFI report notes the council's involvement in developing and piloting initiatives. This is demonstrated by their participation in an innovative Private Finance Initiative project to finance a document imaging and retrieval scheme. Inspectors commended the council's interest in providing front line customer service and introducing modern IT.

BFI found serious weaknesses and deficiencies and considered the council needed to put considerable resources into a number of areas. Inspectors considered more resources were required to clear backlogs of work, implement internal and external audit recommendations, ensure all required referrals were made to the Rent Officer and to improve liaison with housing associations and other landlords.

The BFI identified a need to enhance training provision, operational processes and written procedural guidance for benefit assessors and fraud investigators. Inspectors say these measures would ensure consistent compliance with the Verification Framework, high quality fraud investigations and compliance with legislative requirements.

The report also makes recommendations for the London Borough of Harrow to implement corporate anti-fraud policies and strategies to create a culture in which fraud is not tolerated. Also that management checks should be re-introduced to ensure that benefit payments are made correctly to the right person.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and has asked the council for their proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. [136917]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets Council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

BFI first reported on the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in July 1999. This second report records the current position and measures the progress made by the council since the first inspection. The report provides recommendations aimed at helping the council address weaknesses and to further improve their benefit administration and counter fraud activities.

Inspectors report that Tower Hamlets has responded positively to recommendations made in the first report. In particular the council was found to be monitoring performance in benefit administration more rigorously and ensuring verification work met a consistently high standard. Inspectors concluded that the council was in a strong position to implement the Verification Framework should it choose to do so.

The report notes the way benefit staff and those dealing with homeless people work together to ensure only eligible claimants receive benefit. Dealing with homeless people can be difficult and inspectors commended the council for its efforts.

The BFI found the council is active in investigating fraud and levying sanctions on fraudsters. Inspectors considered there was potential for further progress through the co-ordination of counter fraud activity against claimants who fail to declare income or change of address.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the council for their proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which local authorities have been directed to improve their administration of Housing Benefit following a second inspection by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate; and if he will make a statement. [135260]

Angela Eagle: Directions have not, as yet, been issued following a second inspection by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate of a local authority's Housing Benefit administration. We have, however, given directions in August 2000 to Northampton Borough Council as a result of the Inspectorate's first inspection of that authority.

To date, the Inspectorate has completed second inspections of the London Boroughs of Croydon and Tower Hamlets and Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, all of which had previously been inspected under the powers in section 139A of the Social Security Administration Act 1992. We have previously published the report of the Croydon inspection and are currently studying Croydon council's response to the report. The report on Tower Hamlets will be published this week and the authority will be invited to respond. The report on Sandwell has not yet been published.

Additionally, the Inspectorate has completed inspections of the London Borough of Camden, the City of Edinburgh Council and Newcastle upon Tyne City Council, all of which had previously been the subject of trial inspections which did not take place under the statutory powers.

In the case of Camden we decided that it was not necessary to issue directions. The Inspectorate found that the council had built on the already good standards that were evident during its first inspection. The council has many good practices in place and, in keeping with its Beacon Council status, is readily sharing its knowledge with other authorities.

The report on Edinburgh will be published today and the authority will be invited to respond. The report on Newcastle upon Tyne has not yet been published.

Application Forms

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to simplify the application forms for state benefits; and if he will make a statement. [135529]

Mr. Rooker: All our forms and other products are constantly under review. We frequently adopt suggestions from all areas, including from the public, and we carry out research on the effectiveness of our products. As a result, we constantly make changes and modifications in the interests of clear communication. If my hon. Friend has concerns over a particular form perhaps he will write to me.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [136055]

Mr. Rooker: The Department actively encourages its staff to report any concerns they have about possible wrongdoing, and has in place a range of procedures to enable them to do so.

From the end of this month we are establishing a dedicated Whistleblowers Hotline to enable staff to report wrongdoing along the lines of the Public Interest Disclosure Act

Additionally where a departmental civil servant has reported a concern but does not feel they have had an adequate response, then they can of course have recourse to the Civil Service Commissioners.

If the hon. Member has a particular concern perhaps he will write to me.

Pensioners (Incomes)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners have incomes *(a)* below, *(b)* up to £10, *(c)* £10 to £20, *(d)* £20 to £30 and *(e)* £30 or more above the minimum income guarantee level; and if he will identify in each case how many have savings of (i) nil, (ii) £0 to £3,000, (iii) £3,000 to £8,000, (iv) £8,000 to £12,000, (v) £12,000 to £20,000 and (vi) £20,000 and above. [134557]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

The Distribution of pensioners' incomes below and above the minimum income guarantee (MIG)

	Income for MIG calculation					
Savings	*Below MIG*	*£0–10*	*£10–20*	*£20–30*	*£30–40*	*Total*
Nil	800	200	100	100	600	1,900
£0-£3,000	500	200	100	100	1,000	1,800
£3,000-£8,000	200	100	100	100	700	1,100
£8,000-£12,000	—	—	—	—	400	500
£12,000-£20,000	—	—	—	—	600	700
£20,000+	—	—	—	—	1,900	1,900
Total	1,500	500	400	300	5,200	7,900

Notes:

1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 100,000 cases. No figure is shown where the caseload is less than 50,000.
2. The figures have been calculated using the Policy Simulation Model for Income Related Benefits. This models the benefits system in 2001–02 and is based on data and the Family Resources Survey (FRS) for 1997–98, uprated to 2001 prices.
3. Figures exclude Residential Care or Nursing Home cases.
4. These figures are not calibrated to administrative records of capital levels and as with all survey data may be subject to survey errors.
5. Figures do not include entitled non-recipients of the MIG.
6. Income is defined according to the amount used for the calculation of a benefit award and therefore may differ from actual pensioner income.

Pensioners (Income Support)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of pensioners are claiming Income Support; and if he will break this figure down by *(a)* age and *(b)* gender. [135754]

Mr. Bayley: There are currently 1.6 million pensioners in receipt of the minimum income guarantee. This represents 13.6 per cent. of the pensioner population of Great Britain.

Minimum income guarantee pensioners as a percentage of pensioner population, by age and gender, May 2000

Percentage

Age	*Male claimants*	*Female claimants*
60–74 years	9.7	9.6
75–79 years	7.4	16.3
80 years and over	16.0	33.3
All pensioners	10.2	16.2

Notes:
1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Pensioners are defined as where the claimant, and/or partner are aged 60 or over.
3. Figure may include claimants who are in Residential Care/Nursing Homes.
4. Percentages are calculated using the ONS mid-term 1999 population estimates for the relevant gender and age band, and have been rounded to one decimal.

Sources:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 2000
Office for National Statistics Mid-term Population Estimates, 1999

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners received the minimum income guarantee in each month since January to date. [135931]

Mr. Bayley: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Pensioners receiving the minimum income guarantee, as at February and May 2000

Month	*Number of claimants*
February	1,604,200
May	1,614,500

Notes:
1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Pensioners are defined as where the claimant, and/or partner are aged 60 or over.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

Source:
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, February and May 2000

Pensioners (State Pension)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are not receiving their correct state pension because of the problems with the NIRS2 computer system. [135722]

Mr. Rooker: As at 15 September 2000, Benefit Agency offices had 97,000 pension awards waiting to be reviewed. Not all of these, however, will result in the rate of pension in payment having to be revised as that rate may be correct because of the contingency arrangements deployed by the Benefits Agency.

Pensioners (Occupational Pensions)

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish a breakdown by *(a)* age and *(b)* gender, of the proportion of pensioners who receive an occupational pension of over £20 per week. [135750]

Mr. Rooker: The information is as follows:

Proportion of individual pensioners in receipt of occupational pension income of over £20 per week in 1998–99

Percentage

Age	*All*	*Males*	*Females*
60–64	22	n/a	22
65–69	41	58	27
70–74	39	56	24
75–79	36	51	27
80 and over	29	47	23
All over State Pension age	35	38	21

Notes:
1. Pensioners are defined as individuals over State Pension age (65 for men, 60 for women), hence males aged 60 -64 are not included in the analysis.
2. Occupational pension income includes amounts paid to widows from occupational pension schemes.
3. For individuals with more than one occupational pension or widows' pension only the four highest amounts of occupational pension and three highest amounts of widows' pension are taken into account in calculating these percentages.

Source:
Family Resources Survey 1998–99

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department since 1999 in reducing sickness absence; what targets he has agreed with the Cabinet Office; and if he will make a statement. [135495]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* Since "Working Well Together Report, Managing Attendance In the Public Sector" was issued in 1998, the Department has reviewed and revised the procedures for managing sickness absence in line with the recommendations in that report.

The Cabinet Office prepares each year an annual report of sickness absence in the Civil Service which includes information for each Department. The report for 1999 is currently being finalised and will be published shortly.

Details of the Department's targets for reduced sickness absence for the years 2001 and 2003 against a baseline year of 1998 will be included in its Service Delivery Agreement. This is also to be published shortly.

This Department has agreed the following targets with Cabinet Office for reducing sickness absence: 20 per cent. reduction to 9.7 average working days lost by December 2001; a 30 per cent. reduction to 8.5 average working days lost by December 2003.

Earnings Link

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) when he expects to receive the Government

Actuary's report under section 36 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 on the cost of restoring the earnings link; [136045]

(2) what representations he has made to the Government Actuary's Department regarding the timing of the Actuary's report under section 36 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 on the cost of restoring the earnings link; [136048]

(3) if he has received a draft of the Government Actuary's report under section 36 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000 on the cost of restoring the earnings link. [136050]

Mr. Rooker: The Government Actuary is currently finalising his report on the effect on the National Insurance Fund of an earnings uprating of basic State Retirement Pension, and it will be published when it is completed.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Harmon CFEM Facades

Mrs. Roe: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement about the matter of Harmon CFEM Facades *v.* the Corporate Officer of the House of Commons. [136650]

Mr. Kirkwood: The House of Commons Commission settled its dispute with Harmon CFEM Facades (UK) Limited on 16 August 2000 at the figure of £5.26 million, which included a contribution to Harmon's costs. This sum was very substantially less than that claimed by Harmon.

In making the decision to settle, the Commission took into consideration the judgments of His Honour Judge Humphrey Lloyd QC at the liability trial and at the later interim payment hearing. The subsequent decision in the House's favour of Lord Justice Kennedy to grant permission to appeal the interim payment judgment was a significant factor in reducing the amount of the settlement.

In deciding to settle the action the Commission took into account that were the House to be awarded its costs of defending the damages action (due to be heard in April 2001) the prospect of recovering them was nil due to Harmon's insolvency.

While the Commission is satisfied that a settlement was obtained at a figure substantially less than the amount of Harmon's claim, it is reviewing the outcome of the case.

PRIME MINISTER

Prime Minister's Office

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will estimate what the cost of his Office will be for 2000–01. [134434]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* The cost of my Office from 1 April 2000 to 30 September 2000 was £5.4 million.

Social Exclusion Unit

Mr. Love: To ask the Prime Minister if he will set out the Social Exclusion Unit's current priorities. [136912]

The Prime Minister: Following an extensive consultation exercise over the summer, and the outcome of the spending review, the unit will be publishing shortly an action plan setting out how the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal will be delivered.

The unit is also continuing to monitor implementation of its reports on truancy and school exclusion, rough sleeping, teenage pregnancy and 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training.

In addition, I have asked the unit to work with other Government Departments to explore how we might cut rates of re-offending by ex-prisoners.

The SEU will look at how to boost the rate of employment and reduce the level of homelessness among ex-prisoners. It will also consider whether more effective supervision after release might help to reduce the current high levels of re-offending.

I have asked the SEU to report to me by spring 2001.

I will make a further statement on the unit's future work programme shortly.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Government Energy Policy

15. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Government's energy policy. [133903]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government are committed to competition and to an energy policy based on secure, diverse and sustainable energy supplies at competitive prices.

Privatised Utilities

16. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent steps he has taken to ensure consumers of services provided by privatised utilities receive value for money; and if he will make a statement. [133904]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have brought in the Utilities Act 2000 which places the consumer at the heart of gas and electricity regulation. In addition, the Government work closely with Oftel to ensure that the regulatory system for telecoms operates to promote competition to benefit the consumer. Later this year we will be publishing a Communications White Paper which will set out the Government's proposals for the reform of the framework of communications regulation.

National Changeover Plan

17. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much money his Department has spent on implementing the National Changeover Plan. [133905]

Mrs. Liddell: Information on changeover planning is contained in the second Outline National Changeover plan, published on 9 March.

Motor Industry

19. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the prospects for the motor industry in the UK. [133909]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The prospects for the UK motor industry are good. 1999 car production was the highest since 1972; sales were the fourth highest on record and UK exports were the highest ever. Since 1997, some 9,600 new jobs have been announced with over £3 billion of new investment.

Sub-post Offices

20. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he proposes to take to ensure the maintenance of sub-post office services. [133910]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government are committed to maintaining a nationwide network of post offices. That commitment was clearly demonstrated when the Government accepted all 24 recommendations of the PIU report, "Counter Revolution Modernising the Post Office Network", published in June. To implement the proposals contained in the PIU report the Government have been working closely with the Post Office to develop robust business plans to take forward initiatives to safeguard the future of the network.

31. **Mr. Webb:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the number of sub-post offices that have closed since 1 January. [133921]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Estimates of the number of sub-post offices have not been produced on a calendar or part-year basis by the Post Office in the past and are therefore not available from 1 January to the present. The Post Office Annual Report and Accounts include the numbers of post offices on a financial year basis. In the financial year 1999–2000, there was a net loss of 382 post offices, of which 380 were sub-post offices.

In the light of the Performance and Innovation Unit report on modernising the post office network, the Post Office is revising its methods of collating and reporting information on the network to supply to the Postal Services Commission. The Post Office is currently agreeing with the Commission a process and format for reporting such information quarterly. In the first half of the current financial year, commencing 27 March, there has been a net loss of 333 post offices. The number of rural closures at the half year stage has declined but there has been an increase in the number of town closures (practically all of which have been force majeure). While concerns about the future are undoubtedly a factor, more detailed analysis is taking place to try to identify specific reasons for this change. Due to various factors, including offices closing and reopening within the same financial year, it is not possible to forecast full year figures from quarterly information.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many sub-post offices have closed in each month of the current calendar year, in each region of the UK. [135106]

Mr. Alan Johnson: In the light of the Performance and Innovation Unit report on modernising the post office network, the Post Office is revising its methods of collating and reporting information on the network to supply to the Postal Services Commission. The Post Office is currently agreeing with the Commission a process and format for reporting such information quarterly. In the first two quarters of the current financial year, commencing 27 March, the net closures of sub-post office by the Post Office's internal territorial areas were as follows:

	Quarter 1	*Quarter 2*
North	51	69
West	56	54
East	38	63

Due to various factors, including offices closing and reopening within the same financial year, it is not possible to forecast full-year figures from quarterly information.

Manufacturing Industry

18. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to improve the long-term viability of manufacturing industry. [133906]

Mr. Alan Johnson: We are assisting manufacturing industry to improve its long-term prospects by providing a stable macro-economic framework and by pursuing policies that help firms to innovate and grow.

21. **Mr. Ronnie Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the performance of manufacturing industry in the north-east. [133911]

Mrs. Liddell: The performance of manufacturing industry in the north-east is constantly assessed by a number of organisations. The Government Office for the north-east and the regional development agency, ONE NorthEast, are in regular contact with other partners over business matters in the region.

22. **Mr. Corbett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the performance of manufacturing industry in the west midlands. [133912]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government Office for the West Midlands and Advantage West Midlands, the regional development agency, work closely with partners on matters relating to business and the regional economy. In addition to national assessments such as the Annual Census of Production, the regional studies have included an assessment of the automotive industry as part of the work of the Rover Task Force.

35. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will assess the performance of manufacturing industry in Worcestershire. [133925]

Mr. Alan Johnson: There are no plans to assess the performance of manufacturing industry specifically at the national, regional or sub-regional level. The Annual Census of Production, which is compiled by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as part of the Annual Business Inquiry, does give some indication of relative

performance of manufacturing industry in that it provides data on gross value added per employee on a national and regional basis. This information is freely available in publications such as "Regional Trends" and the "Regional Competitiveness" Indicators. This information can be analysed at a sub-regional level but the ONS does charge for this service. However, the DTI does pay for a sub-regional analysis on a Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) area.

Euro

23. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much his Department has spent preparing small businesses for UK membership of the euro. [133913]

Mrs. Liddell: Nothing.

25. **Mr. Gill:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact on the British economy of joining the euro. [133915]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have set out five economic tests which will have to be met before any decision to join can be taken. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has said that the Treasury will make another assessment of the five tests early in the next Parliament.

Electronic Commerce

24. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the regulatory burden on electronic commerce. [133914]

Mrs. Liddell: This Government have set themselves the goal of being the best place in the world to trade on line. Our clear strategy to achieve this is set out in the UK online annual report, which was launched on 11 September. In addition, we are working closely with the Better Regulation Task Force to identify existing or potential regulatory burdens on e-commerce.

Magnox Power Stations

26. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the implications for the UK's ability to meet its long-term climate change targets of the magnox power stations closure programme. [133916]

Mrs. Liddell: In March my Department issued "Energy Projections for the UK; Working Paper", which included assumptions on energy generation from nuclear plants and their life expectancy. BNFL's announcement on 23 May this year of its strategy for its Magnox stations has no implications for the UK's ability to meet its climate change targets under the Kyoto Protocal.

Radio Spectrum

27. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on future auctions of the radio spectrum. [133917]

Mrs. Liddell: Auctions have important advantages as a method of assigning radio spectrum. They are fair, transparent and efficient in awarding licences to those who will use them to best advantage. Following the successful Third Generation auction earlier this year, auctions will continue to be used, where appropriate, to achieve optimal use of spectrum, facilitate faster roll-out of new services and promote competition. My hon. Friend the Minister of State for Small Business and E-Commerce announced on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 699–700W our intention to award by auction licences for the provision of broadband fixed wireless access at 28 GHz. We will also be considering whether further licences for the provision of broadband fixed wireless access at 40 GHz should be awarded by auction.

Employment Relations Act 1999 (Trade Unions)

28. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received since the coming into force of the provisions of the Employment Relations Act 1999 on *(a)* individual trade union representation and *(b)* collective trade union recognition. [133918]

Mr. Alan Johnson: No representations have been received on the right to be accompanied at disciplinary and grievance hearings, which came into effect on 4 September 2000. Since the statutory procedure on trade union recognition came into force on 6 June 2000, my Department has received two requests for a meeting on the procedure.

Gas-fired Power Stations

29. **Mr. Paul Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the building of new gas-fired power stations. [133919]

Mrs. Liddell: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made clear that his intention to lift the stricter consents policy, applying to new power stations, in November remains unchanged.

EU Membership

33. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he intends to visit the principal applicant countries for EU membership to discuss their applications. [133923]

Mrs. Liddell: DTI ministers regularly visit the EU candidate countries and discuss issues related to EU accession with their Governments. Although my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has no immediate plans to visit any of the countries, I intend to visit Warsaw in December to discuss enlargement and the wider EU economic agenda.

Science

34. **Mrs. Curtis-Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his programme for the public understanding of science. [133924]

Mrs. Liddell: My Department's Public Understanding programme aims to create as many opportunities as possible for people to learn about recent scientific developments and to debate their value and the issues that they raise for society. It also aims to generate interest in SET among young people in order to develop and encourage lifelong interest in these subjects and possibly leading to the pursuit of science-based careers.

Postal Services

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Government's support for the post office network. [133922]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Post Office has been urgently developing plans to implement the recommendations of the PIU report on network modernisation. Subject to validation by a robust business case, Government support will be available for modernising and maintaining the rural network, restructuring of the urban network, establishing and operating universal banking services and pilot trials for the development of Government General Practitioner and internet access and learning point facilities. Under the Spending Review, as the first stage of modernising the post office network, ring-fenced support of £270 million over the next three years has been allocated for new investment to start the implementation of the PIU report.

Universal Bank

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many commercial banks have agreed to work with the Government and the Post Office in the creation of a universal bank; and how many have declined invitations to do so. [134898]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Post Office and the high street banks are continuing to work together to develop the concept of universal banking services and the Government are closely monitoring developments.

Mining (Respiratory Diseases)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* Scottish and *(b)* UK claimants of compensation for mining-related respiratory diseases have (i) received their final settlement and (ii) died before receiving their final settlement. [135123]

Mrs. Liddell: To date the Department has settled 5,161 claims in full and final settlement, of these 557 were claimants in Scotland.

IRISC, the Department's claims handling agents, have been informed of 6,314 claims where the claimant has died since lodging a claim, of these 612 were claimants in Scotland.

Issues remain outstanding that prevent full and final offers in all cases. These issues are in discussion with the solicitors representing the claimants and in the meantime, wherever possible, we will continue to make interim offers following the full assessments, the level of such have been significantly increased to enable offers totalling £100 million to be made by Christmas.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects all compensation payments to ex-miners suffering from respiratory diseases to have been completed. [135121]

Mrs. Liddell: The Department has received around 123,000 claims and these continue to rise by around 1,000 a week. This is a unique process as the biggest personal injury cases in British history, an estimate of two to three years has been given but kept under review. Under normal circumstances, with full court action, the process can take a minimum 10 to 15 years. We are giving priority to claims from those most old and ill, widows and those most likely (on the basis of initial testing) to have emphysema.

Trading Arrangements

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) when the New Electricity Trading Arrangements will commence; [135048]

(2) when he will end the stricter consents policy on new gas-fired power stations. [135049]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 221W, to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard).

North-West Science Review

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the reasons why the Jodrell Bank observatory Merlin project bid was not granted funding by the North-West Science Review; and if he will make a statement. [135869]

Dr. Howells: A total of 52 proposals were received by the North-West Science Review Team. They were not only subjected to peer review to ensure that only excellent science would be funded, but judged by other criteria such as their likely impact on the north-west science base, and on their potential contribution to the future of the north-west economy. The e-Merlin proposal was not ranked highly enough to receive funding when judged against these criteria.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the recipients of funding recently announced by the North-West Science Review; and if he will make a statement. [135868]

Dr. Howells: On 16 October, my noble Friend the Minister for Science and Technology announced that nine science projects in the north-west were to share in £26 million of Government funding. The Daresbury Laboratory, the University of Liverpool, the Liverpool John Moores University, the University of Manchester, the University of Salford and UMIST are all in the lead on projects being funded. The other members of the successful consortia are the University of Lancaster, the Salford Royal Hospitals Trust, the Christie Hospital Trust and the Paterson Institute for Cancer Research.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what priorities his Department has set for the funding of science projects based in the North-West of England. [135867]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry's Department's criteria for the funding of science projects across the United Kingdom science base is scientific excellence.

With regard to the North-West Science Review, the overriding priority remained scientific excellence, however other criteria such as the likely impact on the north-west science base and the potential contribution to the future of the north-west economy were also taken into account.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received about *(a)* the Jodrell Bank observatory Merlin project bid to the North-West Science Review and *(b)* the future funding of the observatory. [135870]

Dr. Howells: *(a)* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has received one letter from a Member of the European Parliament about the e-Merlin project bid to the North-West Science Review. In addition, the Minister for Science has received a second letter on the same topic from a Member of Parliament.

(b) My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has received one letter on the future funding of Jodrell Bank from a Member of Parliament. In addition, the Minister for Science has received two letters on the same topic, one form a Member of Parliament and one from a representative of a local Government association. The Prime Minister has received one letter on this topic from a member of the public.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects a decision from the North-West Science and Daresbury Development Group on the Jodrell Bank Observatory Merlin project bid for funding; and what representations he has received regarding the funding review. [135871]

Dr. Howells: The North-West Science and Daresbury Development Group is not considering the e-Merlin project proposal. This proposal was considered by the North West Science Review Team, whose recommendations for funding were announced by my noble Friend the Minister for Science on 16 October 2000. This proposal was not recommended for funding.

With regard to representation, I have received one letter from Chris Davies, Member of the European Parliament, and in addition, the Minister for Science has received one letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman).

Widescreen Televisions

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure that widescreen televisions sold in the UK are clearly labelled to distinguish whether they are digital or analogue. [135908]

Dr. Howells: Consumers should be able to make an informed choice between buying an integrated digital television and an analogue television with a set top box in order to receive digital broadcasts. The Trade Descriptions Act 1968 prohibits false or misleading descriptions of products—whether by means of a label or by any other means, such as an oral statement. It would therefore be an offence to describe a television set falsely and, if there are instances where traders are misdescribing analogue TVs as digital, I would urge consumers to get in touch with their local trading standards department. My Department is contacting the Local Authorities Co-Ordinating Body on Food and Trading Standards (Lacots) to establish the nature and extent of any problem in this area.

Exporting Businesses (Financial Support)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to extend pre-shipment financial support to exporting businesses through *(a)* ECGD and *(b)* other means. [135591]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* ECGD does already provide finance through its Buyer Credit and Supplier Credit Schemes for progress payments which are identified in the commercial contract. This means that the exporter can receive moneys from the financing arrangements for work completed at each progress payment milestone.

Exporters that require working capital to fund work in progress secure these funds through their commercial banking facilities.

Price Transparency

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what studies his Department has undertaken on the competition effects of increased price transparency due to use of the Internet; and if he will make a statement. [136025]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The Government believe that the internet and e-commerce are generally beneficial to competition. They increase the range of supplies for many products and services. Price transparency is just one aspect. The DTI has not conducted studies on the competition effects of increased price transparency.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the reasons for projected increases in carbon dioxide emissions after 2000. [136092]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Projections will reflect a complex interaction of factors, though significant contributions to projected increased emissions post 2000 are increased economic output, projected fall in nuclear capacity and increases in transport emissions. Details of the assumptions can be found in the working paper entitled, "Energy Projections for the UK," available in the Library of the House, which describes the DTI energy model used to make the projections. The Government are putting in place measures to tackle this emissions growth. Their draft climate change programme identified quantified measures that could reduce C02 emissions in 2010 by 17.5 per cent. below 1990 levels.

Community Hospitals

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received about a purchase by Schroders Salomon Smith Barney of a share of Community Hospitals. [136017]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* On 8 August my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced that he had asked the Competition Commission to consider the question of whether the acquisition of 26.8 per cent. of the ordinary share capital of Community Hospitals Group by enterprises under the control of Salomon International LLC and BUPA constituted a merger and, if so, whether

or not the merger would operate against the public interest. The Commission have called for evidence and are due to deliver their report to the Department by 8 November.

During the Commission's investigation into a merger, it is my practice to forward any representations which I receive to the Commission so that they can take the views expressed into consideration in formulating their report.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps his Department is taking to ascertain that the purchase by Schroders Salomon Smith Barney of a share of Community Hospitals complies with the intent and terms of undertakings given by BUPA at the time of its acquisition of Goldsborough plc. [136018]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The acquisition of 26.8 per cent. of the ordinary share capital of Community Hospitals Group by Schroders Salomon Smith Barney is being considered by the Competition Commission alongside BUPA's proposals to acquire all of Community Hospitals Group. It is for the Competition Commission to consider whether or not either merger operates against the public interest. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will consider what action, if any, should be taken in the light of the Commission's report.

Scientific Research

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the arrangements by which *(a)* the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council and *(b)* the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Council are made accountable to his Department. [133897]

Dr. Howells: The Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council and the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Council are, in common with all of the Research Councils, accountable through their Chief Executives to the Director General Research Councils (DGRC) in the Office of Science and Technology of DTI. The DGRC in turn is accountable to the Permanent Secretary of DTI, who is the Accounting Officer for the Department.

CARAD Programme

Mr. Mudie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the prospects for the CARAD programme following the Comprehensive Spending Review. [133886]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Under the DTI's Civil Aircraft Research and Technology Demonstration (CARAD) programme we have maintained close contact with the UK aerospace industry, supported new CARAD projects and implemented important initiatives in key areas of technology. The future funding levels for CARAD will be reviewed carefully alongside the other budgets and priorities supported by the DTI. Details of the allocations for the next three financial years for all DTI budgets, including CARAD, will be announced when the Department publishes its Expenditure Plans Report next March.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [136059]

Dr. Howells: The procedure is set out in the DTI staff handbook.

If a member of staff feels that the performance of any part of their duties raises a fundamental issue of conscience they should consult a senior officer.

If necessary and if a problem cannot be resolved by other means staff are advised that they may take the matter up with the Principal Establishment and Finance Officer and the Permanent Head of the Department, and that they have a right to have the matter referred to the Head of the Home Civil Service through the Permanent Head of the Department. If a member of staff feels that the response does not represent a reasonable response to their grounds for concern, they may report the matter in writing to the Civil Service Commissioners.

The Department has also designated a senior DTI manager, who has agreed to be available to discuss issues of conscience with any member of staff who may prefer to raise a matter outside the usual channels on a confidential basis.

European Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the implications of Article 15 of the draft Charter of Fundamental Rights for disqualified company directors. [134819]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

The charter will be a political declaration of rights, freedoms and principles and is not legally binding.

Article 15 reiterates the right to freedom of movement of workers, freedom of establishment and freedom to provide services in any member state guaranteed by the Treaty establishing the European Community.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) today, column 555–56W.

Utility Regulators

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list for each year since the office was established *(a)* the number of employees and *(b)* the total running costs of (i) the Office of Telecommunications, (ii) the Office of Gas Supply, (iii) the Office of Electricity Regulations and (iv) the Office of Water Services. [135050]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have been asked to reply.

The information is published in the Regulators' annual reports and in the annual Appropriation Accounts, copies of which are in the Library.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Central Asia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance her Department is providing to the drought affected areas of Central Asia. [135215]

Clare Short: We are taking a regional approach in our response to the drought which is affecting a belt of countries across the whole of Asia. So far we have committed over £5 million for humanitarian assistance in the drought affected countries. Further funds have been set aside to respond to needs in Central Asia specifically. We are currently considering proposals from a number of international agencies, including UN organisations, the Red Cross and international NGOs.

Major Disasters

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if he will list the major disasters for which her Department has provided *(a)* emergency aid and *(b)* redevelopment support over the last 10 years, indicating the effectiveness of the support given in each case. [135395]

Mr. Foulkes: Over the last 10 years, this Department (and its predecessor) has provided emergency aid in a large number of major disasters and it would take a long time to retrieve the details requested. However, since 1997 this Department has provided humanitarian assistance on more than 80 occasions in over 60 countries. During 2000, DFID has provided speedy and appropriate relief to a number of disasters, including floods in West Bengal, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia, a hurricane in Belize, typhoon and tidal wave in North Korea and droughts in Asia and East Africa. We have also continued to provide humanitarian assistance to people affected by conflict in many countries, such as Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Sudan.

Where disasters occur frequently or result in prolonged crises, we are increasingly promoting preparedness and mitigation measures as part of longer-term development programmes. This includes analysing common hazards and their impact on poor people, and assessing the effect of recurrent crises on achieving the targets of sustainable international development.

We are working to strengthen the international humanitarian system. For example, we are working with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to improve their preparedness and response to disasters, specifically in poor countries. We are supplying the United Nations organisations such as the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the World Food Programme, the United Nations Children Fund, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to improve the speed and effectiveness of their responses. We are encouraging the international non-governmental organisations to strengthen standards of assistance for those affected by disasters.

We are working to ensure that the assistance we provide is as effective as possible. To this end it is always based on proper assessment of needs ; d delivery supervised to prevent the diversion of goods away from those in most need. We only fund reputable agencies or NGOs which are already established in the disaster-affected country or have experienced local partners. In addition, we are working in partnership with NGOs to agree minimum standards of assistance.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what procedures exist in her Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the civil service code. [136057]

Mr. Foulkes: Together with the civil service code itself, the procedure to be followed in such circumstances is set out in this Department's staff handbook. Three senior officers are designated as being available to advise staff and to investigate such complaints. Staff have the right to approach them at any time. The procedures also provide for the right to raise such matters with the permanent secretary and, if necessary, with the Civil Service Commissioners. Staff may also be protected by the provisions of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998.

Publications

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her "Literature Survey on intellectual property rights and sustainable human development" cost to produce. [136634]

Mr. Foulkes: The report "Literature Survey on intellectual property rights and sustainable human development" cost £2,500 to produce.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Sport (Schools)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment about the promotion of an anti-drugs strategy via the teaching of sport in schools. [134715]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend and I liaise regularly with ministerial colleagues about sport in schools and physical education. The Government are particularly aware of the potential of sport as a tool for educating young people about health and fitness and for helping them to develop a healthy and safe life style, hence initiatives such as Positive Futures, a joint project involving Sport England, the Youth Justice Board and the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordination Unit, which aims to help vulnerable children avoid drug misuse and crime through sporting activities.

Free Television Licence

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many pensioners aged over 75 years *(a)* do not own a television, *(b)* already pay a reduced TV licence fee, *(c)* live in a household where someone else under 75 pays for the TV licence and *(d)* will be entitled

to the free TV licence instead of paying a full TV licence fee at present; and what proportion of all pensioners aged over 75 years this represents in each case. [134537]

Janet Anderson: Based on information provided by the BBC, the answers to the hon. Member's questions are as follows:

(a) the number of people aged 75 or over who do not own a television set is not known, but over 97 per cent. of all households have television;

(b) 0.5 million households who currently qualify for a concessionary television licence include a person aged 75 or over;

(c) no information is available on the age of the person who has previously paid the television licence fee in households where there is a resident aged 75 or over; and

(d) an estimated 3.1 million households which currently pay the full licence fee will receive a free licence from 1 November.

Television licences cover households rather than individuals, so presenting the above figures as a proportion of the total number of people aged 75 or over would be misleading. There are an estimated 4.35 million people aged 75 or over in the United Kingdom, all of whom are entitled to benefit from a free television licence, but the estimated number of free licences that will be issued is 3.6 million.

National Lottery

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much National Lottery money has been raised for good causes in each week since May 1997. [134481]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 26 October 2000]:* I have placed copies of a table showing weekly payments into the National Lottery Distribution Fund by the lottery operator since the beginning of May 1997 in the Libraries of the House (the figures exclude one-off annual payments).

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the level of returns from the lottery to the good causes in the next licence period. [135903]

Kate Hoey: None; the letting of the next National Lottery licence is a matter for the National Lottery Commission. The Commission has statutory duties to ensure that the National Lottery is run with all due propriety, that the interests of players are protected and, subject to these two criteria, to maximise the returns to good causes.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact on ticket sales of the selection process for the next lottery operator. [135904]

Kate Hoey: None; Ministers are not involved in the process of selecting the next operator, which is a matter for the National Lottery Commission.

New Opportunities Fund

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he intends to make an announcement about future initiatives in health, education and the environment to be funded by the National Lottery through the New Opportunities Fund. [136809]

Mr. Chris Smith: On Monday 6 November, I shall be publishing and laying before Parliament a consultation document, "New Opportunities from the Lottery". Copies will be widely available from my Department and through the Stationery Office. I hope that our proposals will receive widespread support and I look forward to receiving views on how best we can take them forward.

Ministerial Engagements

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 30 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 331W, on ministerial engagements, if he will list the total number of engagements *(a)* accepted, *(b)* cancelled and *(c)* where an official attended in his place. [136177]

Mr. Chris Smith: My hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts attended 200 engagements with non-governmental bodies in the year to 31 October. On eight occasions he was obliged not to fulfil engagements, and on three of these an official attended in his place.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the civil service code. [136056]

Mr. Chris Smith: Paragraph 11 of the civil service code outlines the circumstances in which civil servants may report actions which fall under *(a)*, *(b)*, *(c)* and *(d)*. In my Department the code is operated under the grievance/complaints procedures which are set out in the DCMS staff handbook.

Individuals making a complaint are encouraged to report the matter to their line manager and divisional head within one month of the incident or action of which they are reporting. If staff are not satisfied with their findings, they may appeal to the personnel director (in the first instance) and, ultimately, to the permanent secretary. Alternatively, staff can report the matter to the head of personnel and central services division.

If after this staff are still not satisfied with the response, they may appeal under section 12 of the civil service code to the Civil Service Commissioners.

Film Classification

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the proposed changes to film classification in respect of *(a)* sex and *(b)* violence. [134704]

Mr. Straw: I have been asked to reply.

The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) published its revised classification guidelines in respect of film and video on 14 September. The guidelines reflect the outcome of an extensive consultation and research exercise into public opinion undertaken by the Board. Under the new guidelines, the Board will be more restrictive in the lower classifications on violence, drugs and bad language.

In respect of material classified in the Restricted 18 (R18) category, which is only available in licensed sex shops to those aged 18 and over, the hon. Member may recall that, on 24 July, the Government published a consultation paper to consider whether there were any additional steps that could be taken to protect children from exposure to sexually explicit material contained in videos given an R18 classification by the Board. The consultation period closed on 31 October.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Omagh Inquest Inquiry

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the total cost to date of the Omagh inquest inquiry. [135857]

Mr. Lock: I have been asked to reply.

The total cost to date, inclusive of VAT, of the Omagh inquest is £1,402,000. This represents accommodation and IT costs only.

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the agreed legal fees to barristers and solicitors involved in the Omagh inquest inquiry. [135855]

Mr. Lock: I have been asked to reply.

The legal fees payable from the extra-statutory scheme for representation at the Omagh inquest for the families which sought public funding were based on existing legal aid rates. It is anticipated that £216,787.50 will be paid in fees in respect of the 12 families represented at the inquest.

Probation Board for Northern Ireland

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will publish the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's Annual report for 1999–2000. [136779]

Mr. Ingram: The Probation Board's Annual Report for 1999–2000 was published on 2 November 2000.

A copy of the Report has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will publish the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's Business Plan for 2000–01. [136778]

Mr. Ingram: The Probation Board's Business Plan for 2000–01 was published on 2 November 2000. The Plan sets out the Board's key performance targets for the year. Copies of the Plan have been placed in the Library.

Terrorists Incidents

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for each Police Division in Northern Ireland, how many *(a)* bomb scares or warnings, *(b)* car-bombs recovered by the security forces, *(c)* arson and bomb attacks on premises, *(d)* cases of intimidation and *(e)* shooting incidents there were (1) from 1 January to 30 September and (2) in October to date, indicating (A) how many were related to (i) Loyalist terrorist organisations and (ii) Republican terrorist organisations and (B) how many deaths and injuries were involved and what damage to property resulted from such activity. [134295]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is not held in a form which allows all of these questions to be answered. However, the following tables show for the period mentioned the number of hoax bombing incidents, bombing incidents, shooting incidents, recorded arson attacks on churches, chapels, schools, orange halls and GGA/AOH property, the number of deaths and the number of injuries recorded as a result of the security situation in Northern Ireland. Only in the case of deaths can attribution be given. No records of intimidation are available.

Hoax Bombing Incidents

Police Division	*1 January to 30 September 2000*	*1 October to 19 October 2000*
A	4	—
B	5	—
D	15	—
E	3	—
G	2	—
H	2	—
J	16	—
K	4	1
L	3	—
N	2	—
O	6	—
P	6	—
Total	68	1

Note:

Includes all hoax bombing incidents which were attended by Ammunition Technical Officers.

Bombing Incidents

Police Division	*1 January to 30 September 2000*	*1 October to 19 October 2000*
A	4	1
B	2	1
D	21	1
E	1	1
G	3	—
H	9	—
J	10	—
K	4	—
L	2	—
N	2	—
O	14	2
P	10	2
Total	83	8

Notes:

1. An individual bombing incident may involve one or more explosive devices. Incidents recorded include explosions and defusings. Incidents involving hoax devices, petrol bombs or incendiaries are excluded.

2. Year 2000 statistics are provisional and may be subject to minor adjustment.

Shooting Incidents

Police Division	1 January to 30 September 2000	1 October to 19 October 2000
A	28	2
B	26	5
D	98	5
E	7	1
G	7	2
H	5	—
J	16	—
K	4	—
L	—	—
N	16	—
O	14	1
P	15	1
Total	236	16

Notes:

1. The following types of incidents are included:
   shots fired by terrorists
   shots fired by the security forces
   paramilitary-style attacks involving shootings
   shots heard (and later confirmed)
   other violent incidents where shots are fired (e.g. armed robbery).
2. Year 2000 statistics are provisional and may be subject to minor adjustment.

Arson attacks on properties from 1 January to 19 October 2000

Police Division	Churches/ Chapels	Schools	Orange halls	GAA/AOH
A	1	—	—	—
B	2	6	—	—
D	8	3	3	—
E	—	2	—	—
G	—	1	1	—
H	—	—	1	—
J	3	—	3	—
K	1	—	3	—
L	—	3	4	1
N	—	1	—	—
O	1	—	1	3
P	5	4	2	2
Total	21	20	18	6

Notes:

1. Excludes incidents which were due to vandalism where there was no Sectarian motive. Details of arson attacks on other types of property (e.g. dwellings) are not available at present.
2. Year 2000 statistics are provisional and may be subject to minor adjustment.

Deaths

Police Division	1 January to 30 September 2000		1 October to 19 October 2000	
	by Loyalist	by Republican	by Loyalist	by Republican
A	—	1	—	—
B	—	—	—	1
D	4	—	—	—
E	—	—	—	—
G	—	—	—	—
H	2	—	—	—
J	1	—	—	—
K	—	—	—	—
L	—	—	—	—
N	—	—	—	—
O	—	1	—	—
P	1	—	—	—
Total	8	2	—	1

Injuries

Police Division	1 January to 30 September 2000	1 October to 19 October 2000
A	95	5
B	128	11
D	230	19
E	39	1
G	32	2
H	25	5
J	161	—
K	20	—
L	7	—
N	76	—
O	8	1
P	32	4
Total	853	48

Notes:

1. Includes all injuries as a result of the security situation and serious public disorder.
2. Year 2000 statistics are provisional and may be subject to minor adjustment.

Police Service

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 16W, on the police service, on what date the Chief Constable initiated the review of the RUC appraisal system to take account of human rights performance; who was instructed to take charge of this review; what is this officer's rank; and what are the terms of reference of the review. [135823]

Mr. Ingram: A review of the current appraisal system commenced in the autumn of 1999. Since the spring of 2000, the review has been widened to take account of Patten's recommendations. The review is proceeding in tandem with the work of the national appraisal group and the revised system will incorporate human rights issues. The Assistant Chief Constable, Personnel and Training, has overall responsibility for this work and in addition to considering the human rights issues, is undertaking periodic reviews to address the following areas:

(a) the general effectiveness of the appraisal system;

(b) that the interviews and forms are being completed in accordance with the timetable;

(c) that the policing priorities agreed by the appraisee and appraiser are consistent with local and strategic objectives;

(d) the quality of the completed forms;

(e) the quality of the development plans;

(f) that appropriate procedures are in place, both at headquarters and at local level, to deal with those matters which arise from the process;

(g) the perception of all those involved in the process in terms of openness, fairness and value.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 13W, if he will place a copy of the revised conduct regulations for the police in the Library. [135804]

Mr. Ingram: Copies of all the new regulations pertaining to the Royal Ulster Constabulary and covering conduct, complaints and appeals have now been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 23 October 2000, *Official Report*, column 19W, what representations he has received concerning possible venues for annual conferences of police services north and south of the Border; what dates are being considered for the first such conference; and if this conference will be open to attendance by *(a)* the Police Ombudsman, *(b)* the Human Rights Commission, *(c)* the Equality Commission, *(d)* non-governmental organisations and *(e)* the press. [135731]

Mr. Ingram: I have nothing to add to my previous answer.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the progress made by his Department since 1999 in reducing sickness absence; what targets he has agreed with the Cabinet Office; and if he will make a statement. [135463]

Mr. Mandelson: The Cabinet Office prepares each year an annual report of sickness absence in the civil service which includes information for each Department. The report for 1999 is currently being finalised and will be published shortly.

Details of the Department's targets for reduced sickness absence for years 2001 to 2003 against a baseline year of 1998 will be included in its service delivery agreement. This is also to be published shortly.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper, or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the Civil Service Code. [135454]

Mr. Mandelson: The Civil Service Code is set out in full in the Northern Ireland Office Home Civil Service Staff Handbook. The procedures which staff should follow when they wish to report matters in the categories listed are also set out in the Staff Handbook in the section on Complaints about Personal Matters. This section includes details about the Independent Departmental Adviser with whom staff may discuss their concerns, and the circumstances in which they may write direct to the Civil Service Commissioners.

HEALTH

Antipsychotic Drugs

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what research his Department has evaluated into the risk of idiopathic venous thromboembolism in users of conventional antipsychotic drugs; [134266]

(2) what guidance his Department issues to psychiatrists concerning the risk of idiopathic venous thromboembolism in users of conventional antipsychotic drugs. [134267]

Ms Stuart: The Medicines Control Agency (MCA) is currently evaluating an epidemiological study published in the Lancet[1] on the 7 October 2000, which suggests an increased risk of first time idiopathic venous thromboembolism in current users of anti-psychotics compared to non-users.

As well as the published medical literature, the MCA uses a number of sources of information to assess risk, including the UK spontaneous reporting scheme (the Yellow Card Scheme). Independent expert advice will be sought from the Committee on Safety of Medicines, who will be asked to advise on any guidance for health professionals including psychiatrists.

[1] Antipsychotic drug use and risk of first-time idiopathic venous thromboembolism: a case control study. Zornberg GL., Jick H. Lancet 2000; 356:1219–23.

Dystonia

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has carried out into dystonia. [134467]

Mr. Denham: The Department has not carried out any research into dystonia.

The main Government agency for research into the causes of disease is the Medical Research Council (MRC), funded via grant-in-aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. The MRC provided more than £3 million in 1999–2000 for research into movement disorders, including dystonia.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the National Institute for Clinical Excellence about its appraisal of the cost effectiveness of beta interferon. [134775]

Mr. Denham: The Department as one of the many stakeholders was given the opportunity to comment on National Institute for Clinical Excellence's provisional appraisal determination and draft guidance on beta interferon for the treatment of multiple sclerosis. Like other stakeholders we are awaiting the outcome of the appeal which has been made against the final appraisal determination.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people with multiple sclerosis were part of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence review team on prescribing beta interferon. [135481]

Mr. Denham: The Department does not hold this information; details of the appraisal process are a matter for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). NICE has not yet published its final guidance on beta interferon for the treatment of multiple sclerosis, but will in accordance with its usual procedure have consulted interested parties including patient representative groups.

Cannabis

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his policy is towards prescription of cannabis for medicinal purposes by NHS doctors. [134741]

Mr. Hutton: We consider that doctors should not prescribe cannabis until the quality, safety and efficacy of a medical form have been scientifically established and a marketing authorisation issued by the Medical Control Agency. This is a procedure that all prospective new medicines must go through.

When the benefits of a cannabis-based medicine have been scientifically demonstrated, the Government would be willing to amend the misuse of drugs controls to allow the prescribing of such a medicine.

There are currently two trials under way. The first, a three-year study to attempt to measure the therapeutic effects of cannabis in people with multiple sclerosis, is due to report early in 2004. This study has received £950,000 from the Medical Research Council.

The second trial is being managed by GW Pharmaceuticals Ltd. with the aim of developing a cannabis-based medicine. Initial findings from this trial are expected later this year.

Adoption

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to review their guidelines on adoption in respect of *(a)* the age of the prospective adopter and *(b)* the ethnicity or cultural background of the prospective adopter. [134897]

Mr. Hutton: We made clear in Local Authority Circular (98)20, copies of which are available in the Library, that although a child's ethnic origin, culture, language and religion are significant factors to be taken into account when adoption agencies are considering the most appropriate placement for a child, it is unacceptable for a child to be denied loving adoptive parents solely on the grounds that the child and adopters do not share the same racial or cultural background.

Although age is one consideration among many that is taken into account in assessing the suitability of prospective adopters, the guidance also makes it clear that there should be no upper age restriction to people applying to become adoptive parents. It is clear that for far too long children drift in the care system when suitable adopters are available.

In February, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced a review of adoption services. In July, the report by the Performance and Innovation Unit was published for consultation. We will be publishing a White Paper on adoption before the end of the year. In addition, as part of our commitment to modernising services, we will be publishing, for consultation, a draft set of evidence-based national standards for adoption.

Chlorpromazine

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated relating to the side effects of chlorpromazine. [134395]

Ms Stuart: The Medicines Control Agency (MCA) and the expert advisory committee, the Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM), have evaluated adverse reactions associated with chlorpromazine including involuntary movement disorders, abnormalities of the blood, sedation, muscle rigidity and the sensitivity of patients with underlying dementia to side effects. The MCA/CSM published advice on these reactions in the bulletin "Current Problems in Pharmacovigilance", which is received by all registered medical practitioners, in April 1979 September 1986, November 1993, November 1994, November 1995 and March 1996.

The MCA continuously monitors the safety of chlorpromazine, as with all medicines, from the United Kingdom spontaneous reporting scheme (the Yellow Card Scheme), and other sources including the published medical literature. A recently published study[1] suggesting an increased risk of first-time idiopathic venous thromboembolism in current users of antipsychotics including chlorpromazine compared with non-users, is currently under evaluation.

The Department has also funded research to the value of £1.4 million into antipsychotic drugs, including chlorpromazine. One project is a multi-centre randomised controlled trial in severe schizophrenia. This will compare conventional anti-psychotics with newer agents to assess relative effectiveness and differences in quality of life. A second project is a systematic review of comparative studies of depot and oral antipsychotics: quality of life, patient satisfaction and adverse effects will be among the outcomes studied.

[1] Antipsychotic drug use and risk of first-time idiopathic venous thromboembolism: a case control study. Zornberg GL, Jick H. Lancet 2000;356:1219–23.

Doctors (Overseas Recruitment)

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his policy in relation to the recruitment of doctors from abroad; to what extent he proposes to seek to recruit consultants from abroad; whether the established regulations for the appointment of consultant will apply; and what financial incentives will be offered to such recruits from abroad to accept posts within the National Health Service. [135084]

Mr. Denham: International recruitment has made a valuable contribution to the National Health Service throughout its history, and is a two-way process in view of the increasing globalisation of the world's medical work force.

In the short term, until we benefit from the increased investment in training, we will be increasing the recruitment of trained doctors from abroad. The consultant appointment regulations will apply to all appointments to that grade.

The reward package offered to doctors from abroad will be consistent with that offered to United Kingdom trained doctors.

NHS Services (Complaints)

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many complaints have been made about NHS services from residents of the Borough of Kingston upon Thames in each year from 1992 to 2000. [135779]

Ms Stuart: Information on complaints about the National Health Service is not collated in the format requested. Data are compiled by the health authority or NHS trust rather than by complainant's district of residence. Information on written complaints in England is published in, "Handling Complaints: Monitoring the NHS Complaints Procedures", copies of which are

available in the Library. The latest figures are for 1998–99. The data held prior to 1996–97 are not directly comparable.

NHS General Practitioners

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many practising NHS GPs there were per head of population in each constituency in each year between 1987 and 1999; [135782]

(2) what the average number of patients registered with an NHS GP practice was in each constituency in each year between 1987 and 1999. [135784]

Mr. Denham: Statistics collected in the Department are largely by health authority, local authority or National Health Service trust, reflecting local lines of responsibility and accountability. The Department publishes a wide range of detail at these levels. Comprehensive information at constituency level could be collected and published only at disproportionate cost.

Unrestricted Principals and Equivalents (UPEs)[1] per 10,000 patients of UPEs and residential population[2] by health authority—1996 to 1998[3]

	UPEs per 10,000 pop	Average list size
1987–1995[4]		
1996	5.5	1,885
1997	5.5	1,819
1998	5.5	1,807
1999	5.5	1,845

[1] UPEs include Unrestricted Principals, PMS Contracted GPs and PMS Salaried GPs
[2] ONS mid year population estimates
[3] General Medical Practitioner data as at 1 October each year
[4] Comparative detailed data is not available before 1996
Notes:
1. Based on ONS mid year population estimates
2. Based on patients of UPEs
3. Health authority level data is available in the annual "General and Personal Medical Services Statistics"
Source:
Department of Health General & Personal Medical Services Statistics & ONS population census

Larval Therapy

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which conventional treatments have been tested in the West Cumberland hospital study comparing larval therapy to modern conventional therapy; what conclusions the study has reached concerning the cost efficiency of *(a)* conventional treatment and *(b)* larval therapy; and if he will make a statement. [135812]

Mr. Denham: The conventional treatment tested in the West Cumberland Hospital study comparing larval therapy to modern conventional therapy was standard Hydrogel dressings (Intrasite gel: Smith and Nephew Medical Ltd.). The study found that the median cost of the cases using conventional treatment was £136.23 whereas the median cost of the cases using larval therapy was £78.64.

NHS Staff

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to improve working conditions and morale of staff of the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [135703]

Mr. Denham: We are committed to improving the working conditions and moral of staff in the National Health Service by becoming a better employer. We recognise that a well motivated work force, able to manage a healthy work-life balance and fairly rewarded, will provide a better service to patients. For the last two years pay awards recommended by the independent review bodies have been implemented in full. Since 1997 nurses have had a 15 per cent. pay rise.

On 4 October, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State published the human resources performance framework which will measure for the first time the way in which NHS employers treat their staff, and which will link their performance to the resources they receive. An integral part of the framework is the new improving working lives standard. This introduces a kite-marking system for NHS employers to demonstrate how they are improving the working lives of all their staff. By April 2003, all NHS employers are expected to be accredited as putting the IWL standard into practice.

In September this year each NHS trust received £25,000 to improve the working environment for staff. A further £30 million has been allocated to expand child care provisions so that by 2004 there will be provision for around 100 on-site nurseries. An additional £6 million in 2001–02, rising to £8 million in 2003–04, is being invested to extend occupational health services for staff in the NHS. An extra £140 million is being invested by 2003–04 in personal development and training, to provide access to learning for all NHS staff. There were 10,000 more nurses in September 1999 than in September 1997, indicating that moral is improving.

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will introduce the market forces supplement for NHS staff; and how it will be allocated. [135844]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The National Health Service Plan set out our plans to invest in staff working in the National Health Service. This includes the introduction of a new market forces supplement to top up the pay of staff in areas where there are labour market shortages. We will be publishing our proposals in due course.

Down's Syndrome

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on access to NHS services by people with Down's syndrome. [135885]

Mr. Hutton: The National Health Service Plan makes clear our commitment to challenging discrimination in the NHS on any grounds, including disability. Anyone who has a learning disability, including everyone who has Down's syndrome, has the same rights of access to NHS services to NHS services as everyone else. This fundamental principle will be re-inforced in our learning disability strategy which is to be published as a White Paper in the early months of next year.

Whistleblowers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what procedures exist in his Department for a civil servant to report actions which *(a)* are illegal, improper, or unethical, *(b)* are in breach of constitutional

convention or a professional code, *(c)* may involve possible maladministration and *(d)* are otherwise inconsistent with the civil service code. [135460]

Ms Stuart: The Department is committed to achieving the highest possible standards of service and ethical standards in public life in all of its practices. The civil service code enables all civil servants to report their concerns to, among others, their senior manager, the Departmental security officer or the Civil Service Commissioners. In addition the Department will shortly introduce a "whistleblowing" policy covering disclosures by staff of malpractice, illegal acts or serious omissions of duty at work. The policy has been developed in line with the best practice advised by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. It enables staff to raise—at an early stage and in the right way—any concerns they may have about activities within the Department.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 18 September regarding a constituent (reference POH(6)5608/54). [135457]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* A reply to my hon. Friend's letter was sent on 31 October.

Nurses (Overseas Recruitment)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department has issued regarding the recruitment of nurses from overseas; and if he will make a statement. [135835]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* The Department published guidance on international nursing recruitment in November 1999. The guidance stresses that international recruitment should be valued and has made a valuable contribution to the National Health Service throughout its history; is a two-way process in view of the increasing globalisation of the world's nursing work force; and is viable only when its professional and service value can be clearly demonstrated, and if the recruit's placement in the NHS will have no negative impact upon their home healthcare system.

Each NHS region is appointing a team to lead on international recruitment. This activity will be managed across the entire region to ensure that best practice is followed and promoted. They will also promote collaboration between trusts, to achieve efficient, ethical international recruitment.

Children's Society

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Children's Society about the Safe House in Leeds; and if he will make a statement. [136096]

Mr. Hutton: We would like to pay tribute to the Children's Society and all those involved over the years in running the Leeds Safe House. We are pleased to see that, although the refuge has closed, the Society will continue to help young runaways in Leeds through its work in the Leeds Safe on the Streets network.

The Children's Society and the Department are currently in discussions about developing other more flexible ways of meeting the needs of children and young people who run away from home and we are keen to see these develop for all such children across the country.

Medical Training

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what programmes in undergraduate medical training there are which ensure that doctors study both educational and clinical psychology. [136094]

Mr. Denham: Individual university medical schools determine their own undergraduate medical curricula in the light of the recommendations from the General Medical Council's (GMC) Education Committee, which has the statutory responsibility to determine the extent of knowledge and skill required for the granting of primary medical qualifications in the United Kingdom. The Committee's most recent recommendations were published in the 1993 report "Tomorrow's Doctors".

University medical schools are in the process of implementing the recommendations contained in the report and the GMC is monitoring progress.

Diagnostic and Treatment Centres

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health where the newly proposed diagnostic and treatment centres will be located; and if he will make a statement. [135845]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* No decisions have been made on the location of the diagnostic and treatment centres announced in The NHS Plan. We are working with NHS Executive Regional Offices to determine where these new centres will be located, and will announce details when this process is complete.

Pharmacists

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for funding pharmacists to deliver medicines to the patient's door. [135846]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* "Pharmacy in the Future—Implementing the National Health Service Plan", which was published on 12 September, sets out our programme for pharmacy in the National Health Service; copies are available in the Library. We shall be discussing with the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee changes in the terms of service and distribution of the global sum for community pharmacy to establish minimum standards and promote and reward high-quality services. When parliamentary time permits, we will introduce legislation to allow a new form of agreement between the NHS, pharmacists and pharmacy owners.

Expenditure

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will set out the gross expenditure on family

health services, by service, for each year since 1979–80, in the same format as figure 11.12 of Cm 4603, "The Government's Expenditure Plans 2000–01"; [136023]

(2) what was the gross expenditure on general medical services, as a percentage of gross family health services expenditure, in each year since 1979–80; [136022]

(3) what percentage of gross NHS expenditure was represented by gross general medical services expenditure in each year since 1979–80. [136024]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 November 2000]:* The information requested is shown in the table for the years 1989–90 to 1998–99.

Expenditure figures from 1979–80 to 1997–98 are not held in the format requested.

It is also not possible to provide expenditure figures for 1999–2000 as the general medical services discretionary element became part of the unified allocation to health authorities.

Family health services gross expenditure, 1989–90 to 1998–99

£ million

	1989-90	*1990-91*	*1991-92*	*1992-93*	*1993-94*	*1994-95*	*1995-96*	*1996-97*	*1997-98*	*1998-99*	*% real terms growth 1989–90 to 1998–99*
Drugs non-discretionary	1,952	2,091	2,210	2,356	2,352	2,243	2,210	2,014	2,171	1,837	[1]—
Drugs discretionary	0	0	125	295	628	1,009	1,296	1,794	1,936	2,519	[1]—
Drugs Total	1,952	2,091	2,335	2,651	2,980	3,252	3,506	3,808	4,107	4,356	81.6
General Medical Services											
Non-discretionary	1,569	1,484	1,656	1,768	1,840	1,902	1,965	2,073	2,198	2,243	16.3
Discretionary	0	464	600	686	715	723	754	800	835	878	54.0
Total General Medical Services discretionary and non-discretionary	1,569	1,948	2,256	2,454	2,555	2,625	2,719	2,873	3,033	3,121	61.9
PMS[2]	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	37	[1]—
General Dental Services	948	1,040	1,246	1,306	1,222	1,279	1,290	1,323	1,348	1,438	23.4
PDS[2]	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	4	[1]—
Dispensing Costs	518	561	603	658	677	679	706	746	768	781	22.7
General Ophthalmic Services	108	111	141	172	192	213	223	237	241	240	80.8
Total FHS spend	5,095	5,751	6,581	7,241	7,626	8,048	8,444	8,987	9,497	9,977	59.4
Gross GMS as a percentage of Gross FHS	30.8	33.9	34.3	33.9	33.5	32.6	32.2	32.0	31.9	31.3	
Total NHS expenditure (Gross)	21,132	23,654	26,785	29,371	31,075	32,890	34,430	35,729	37,793	39,884	53.6
Total GMS as a percentage of gross NHS	7.4	8.2	8.4	8.4	8.2	8.0	7.9	8.0	8.0	7.8	

[1] n/a
[2] Discretionary
Notes:
1. Data are taken from the Published Departmental Report for GMS data.
2. Personal Medical Services (PMS) and Personal Dental Services(PDS) schemes are Primary Care Act pilots designed to test locally managed approaches to the delivery of primary care. PDS and PMS expenditure figures, although not allocations, exclude any related capital investment by NHS trusts. PDS expenditure figures are also gross of patient charge income whereas allocations are net of charges.
3. From 1993–94 onwards, gross HCHS revenue, gross NHS revenue and NHS total gross expenditure is inflated because of the interest dividends paid by NHS Trusts.
4. Please note that Discretionary GMS data were not available in 1998–99 as they did not start until 1990–91.

Trafford General Hospital Mortuary

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the condition of the mortuary of Trafford General Hospital. [136065]

Mr. Denham: An upgrade of the current mortuary facilities at Trafford General Hospital took place in 1998 so that it would meet the necessary minimum standards. Trafford Healthcare National Health Service Trust is now in the process of developing a business case for a new mortuary and this has the support of the north-west regional office of the NHS Executive.

Bed-blocking (Kent)

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many bed days were lost through bed-blocking at *(a)* the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital, Margate, *(b)* the William Harvey Hospital, Ashford and *(c)* the Kent and Canterbury Hospital during the past 26 weeks; and if he will make a statement. [136078]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the form requested. I refer the hon. Member to the East Kent Health Authority, which may have the information he requests.

Elective Surgery (Kent)

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many appointments for elective surgery were postponed or cancelled at *(a)* the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital, Margate, *(b)* the William Harvey Hospital, Ashford and *(c)* the Kent and Canterbury Hospital during the past 26 weeks. [136077]

Mr. Denham: This information is not collected in the form requested.

Occupational Therapists

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he plans to take to improve the recruitment and retention of occupational therapists in the NHS. [122908]

Mr. Denham: The national recruitment, retention and vacancy survey published September 1999 gave us the latest authoritative data on staff vacancies from 98 per cent. of National Health Service trusts. They show that only 1.9 per cent. of occupational therapy posts have been vacant for three months or more (in England). The Government are ensuring that effective recruitment and retention policies are in place to make the best use of trained staff and that training levels are sufficient to get a better match between supply and demand.

We are taking a number of steps which will help to address the issue of recruitment and retention of occupational therapists. These include the publication of the framework for the management of human resources for the whole of the NHS, "Working Together: securing a quality workforce for the NHS", which sets targets for local employers to improve recruitment and retention year on year. We have issued guidance to the service on improving working lives and we will shortly be issuing guidance on lifelong learning and continuing professional development.

We are also modernising services and modernising employment practice in the NHS: developing more supportive, flexible and family friendly working practices; extending and improving investment in lifelong learning and professional development; tackling violence and racism in the workplace; involving staff in the way services are delivered and in the changes and developments that affect their working lives.

We have accepted in full the pay increases recommended by the Pay Review Body for Nursing Staff, Midwives, Health Visitors and Professions Allied to Medicine (including occupational therapist) for 2000–01. The review body has recommended an across-the-board increase of 3.4 per cent. for 2000–01. Experienced staff will receive total increases of up to 8.4 per cent.

TREASURY

Debt Write-offs (Privatised Industry)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the amount of debt written off by the Government for each industry privatised since 1980. [135906]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The table shows the amount of debt written off for each industry privatised since 1980. Where relevant the table also shows the type of debt concerned and the amount of debt injected.

	Debt written off			*Debt injected*	
Industry	*Year*	*£ million*	*Type of Debt*	*Year*	*£ million*
British Steel	1980–81	509.3	National Loans Fund	—	—
British Aerospace	1980–81	60	Public Dividend Capital	—	—
National Freight Corporation[1]	1980–81	100	National Loans Fund	—	—
British Airways	1980–81	160	Public Dividend Capital	—	—
British Transport Docks Board[2]	1982–83	81.3	National Loans Fund	1982–83	25
British Telecommunications	1984–85	2,789.9	National Loans Fund	1984–85	3,500
British Gas	—	—	—	1986–87	2,500
BAA	1986–87	43.5	National Loans Fund	—	—
British Steel	1988–89	500	Public Dividend Capital	—	—
British Steel	1988–89	3,480	Borrowing under Iron and Steel Act 1982	—	—
Harland and Wolff	1989–90	422.5	Assistance under Aircraft and Shipbuilding Industries (Northern Ireland) Order 1979	—	—
Short Brothers	1989–90	390	Loan by DED	—	—
Water companies	1989–90	4,973.3	National Loans Fund	1989–90	72.9
Water companies	1989–90	55	Public Works Loan Board	—	—
Electricity (England and Wales)	—	—	—	1990–91	3,583
Electricity (Scotland)[3]	1991–92	1,043.6	National Loans Fund	1991–92	625.9
NTL	—	—	—	1991–92	22
Northern Ireland Electricity	—	—	—	1993–94	70.3
Belfast Airport	—	—	—	1994–95	15.2
British Coal	1994–95	1,633.4	Voted Loans	—	—
Railtrack	1995–96	1,229	National Loans Fund	1996–97	585
Total		17,470.8			10,999.3

[1] Privatised as National Freight Consortium (now NFC).

[2] Privatised as Associated British Ports Holdings.

[3] Prior to privatisation, National Loans Fund Debt due to the South of Scotland Electricity Board nuclear programme of £1,368.4 million was transferred to Scottish Nuclear Ltd. and subsequently written off.

[4] In the case of the privatisation of British Energy, on 5 June 1996, it was agreed that, of the £1,745 million of debt to Government created as the result of the reorganisation of the nuclear power generating industry prior to the privatisation, £600 million would be converted into a new debt owed to Government, £700 million converted into 700 million shares with a face value of £1, and £445 million would be written off.

Fuel Taxes

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much fuel duty has derived from the taxation of alternative fuels; and what percentage this represents of the total tax on road fuel, since the most recent Budget. [135651]

Mr. Timms: The receipts of excise duty from 'gas for use as road fuel' between April and September 2000 are £1.6 million. This represents 0.01 per cent. of the total excise receipts for road fuels.

This represents a growth of over 160 per cent. on receipts from the similar period last year.

Company Cars

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on the review of the taxation of company cars. [135898]

Mr. Timms: A major reform of company car tax, to be implemented from April 2002, was announced by the Chancellor in the 1999 Budget, following a review of the system in the light of criticism of its inherent perverse incentives for some company car users to drive extra, unnecessary business miles. The main details of how the system will work in practice were announced in a Budget 2000 press release (Rev6)—'Protecting the environment: Reform of company car taxation' as legislated for the Finance Act 2000.

Service Delivery Agreements

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish the White Paper 'Service Delivery Agreements: A Guide'; and when Departments will publish their own service delivery agreements. [136931]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I will be presenting "Service Delivery Agreements: A Guide" (Cm4915) to the House and publishing it tomorrow. Departments will be publishing their own Service Delivery Agreements on departmental websites on the same day, and a full hard copy set will be placed in the Library of the House for information.

Banking Services

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he is taking to ensure that banking services are available to all. [133907]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) on 20 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 311W.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Pan-European Political Parties

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the policy of Her Majesty's Government relating to the proposal of the Commission and Parliament of the European Union for an amendment to be made to Article 192 of the Community Treaty to require the European Council to lay down a statute of conditions governing the recognition, rules, and funding of pan-European political parties. [135402]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

European political parties already exist and are recognised in the EC Treaty. The proposal for a legal base to allow the establishment of a statute to regulate these parties is intended to ensure the transparency of their funding. We strongly support this aim.

Rural Policing

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what improvements in rural policing will result from the £15 million announced on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, column 714W. [136777]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Chief officers will target the money as they see fit, keeping their local communities informed of where improvements can be expected.

Guidance to be issued under the Local Government Act 1999 will require those police authorities who were given a share of the money to provide a clear account in their Best Value Performance Plans. For the previous year they will set out what improvement they sought with the money, which Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) were used to measure their performance, and how they performed. For the forthcoming year, they will detail what improvement they seek and which BVPIs will be used to measure that. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary will inspect forces on the basis of that statement.

European Charter of Fundamental Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if Article 5 of the draft European Charter of Fundamental Rights would preclude *(a)* paid servitude and *(b)* football transfer fees; and if he will make a statement. [134894]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

The Charter will be a political declaration of rights, freedoms and principles and is not legally binding.

Article 5.1 and 5.2 correspond to Article 4.1 and 4.2 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) today, columns 555–56W.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the relationship between Article 20 of the draft European Charter of Fundamental Rights and diplomatic immunity. [134818]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

The Charter will be a political declaration of rights, freedoms and principles and is not legally binding.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) today, columns 555–56W.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the consequences of Article 7 of the draft European Charter of Fundamental Rights for *(a)* the media and *(b)* surveillance of criminals. [134793]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

The Charter will be a political declaration of rights, freedoms and principles and is not legally binding.

Article 7 corresponds to Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) today, columns 555–56W.

Prisons (Health Care Services)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment he has made of the arrangements for the delivery of health care services in prisons in England. [134384]

Mr. Boateng: A comprehensive assessment of the arrangements for delivering health care services in prisons was conducted prior to the publication of "The Future Organisation of Prison Health Care" in March 1999. The programme of reform set out in that report requires each prison and health authority jointly to review the health needs of the local prison population and to develop joint improvement plans by the end of March 2001.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to make available specific ring-fenced funds for health-related service improvements in prisons in England. [134387]

Mr. Boateng: Prison Service funds are not generally ring-fenced for particular purposes. The reform and improvement of prison health care is a high priority for the Government and this will be reflected in business plans and financial allocations within the Prison Service for 2001–04. Provisional plans are for significant additional investment in health care over this period, including up to £35 million to rebuild or refurbish those prison health care centres in England and Wales that most badly need it.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the work programmes are of *(a)* the prisons task force and *(b)* the prisons health policy unit; and what plans he has to report on their progress. [134388]

Mr. Boateng: The joint work programme of the prison health policy unit and the prison health task force was set out in the "Prison Health Handbook", which was published in September 2000. Copies have been placed in the Library. These will publish a joint annual report on their work.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will arrange for the NHS to be responsible for health care services in prisons in England. [134385]

Mr. Boateng: The Government's policy on responsibilities for prison health care was set out in the report "The Future Organisation of Prison Health Care", published in March 1999. That document sets out the rationale for an approach based on a partnership between the Prison Service and the NHS as the best way of meeting the health care needs of prisoners.

Illegal Immigrants

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the fine imposed on a haulier at Dover who voluntarily reported his discovery of illegal immigrants in his lorry. [135022]

Mrs. Roche: Without more detail I am not sure to which haulier the hon. Member is referring. Any haulier who suspects that persons are concealed in their vehicle should report the matter immediately to the authorities, whether in the United Kingdom or abroad. To do otherwise may give rise to suspicion that they are deliberately involved in facilitating the illegal entry of such persons. If a haulier has taken proper measures to secure his vehicle in accordance with the Code of Practice for Vehicles, he will have grounds for establishing a defence against the Civil Penalty that may be imposed. Where a penalty is imposed there are thirty days in which to lodge a notice objecting to liability.

British Stasi Agents

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) in what circumstances it is the Government's policy to reveal the identity of British Stasi agents in the absence of a decision to prosecute them; [135005]

(2) for what reason no files have been passed to the Crown Prosecution Service by the police or the security service concerning the possible prosecution of British Stasi agents; [135006]

(3) if it is his policy not to expose British Stasi agents if they provided *(a)* unclassified personal information to their controllers, *(b)* unclassified political information to their controllers or *(c)* classified information to their controllers. [135027]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the statement I made on 21 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns 587–99, and the one that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department made on 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 182–229WH, concerning the cases involving the East German Stasi.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners have breached one or more conditions of their release under the Home Detention Curfew Scheme since its inception. [134768]

Mr. Boateng: Of the 26,898 prisoners placed on the Home Detention Curfew scheme by 30 September 2000, 1,756 have been reported as having breached one or more of the conditions of their release while subject to the Home Detention Curfew scheme.

This figure includes prisoners who are reported:

as having breached the conditions of the curfew (section 38A(1)(a) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991);

as no longer able to be electronically monitored (section 38A(1)(b) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991);

as presenting a risk of serious harm to the public (section 38A(1)(c) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991); and

as having committed an offence or breached any other requirement of probation supervision (section 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991). Curfewees who are charged with new offences may also be recalled on any of the preceding grounds depending on the circumstances of the case.

Prisoners whose current sentence is in respect of an offence committed before 1 January 1999 are not liable to be recalled under section 39 of the Act. In such cases, where the curfewee has breached the requirements of probation supervision or where they have committed a further offence and it has not been possible to revoke their licence under section 38A of the Act, the breach may be referred to the courts under section 38(1) of the Act. The total number of such cases referred to the courts is not held centrally.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many and what criminal offences have been committed by prisoners released under the home detention curfew scheme. [134773]

Mr. Boateng: Of the 26,898 prisoners placed on the Home Detention Curfew (HDC) scheme by 30 September 2000, 555 are known by the Prison Service to have been cautioned or convicted of a further offence committed while on HDC or are pending prosecution for such an offence. The total number of offences committed by these prisoners is 1,003. A breakdown of the offences is contained in the given table.

Breakdown of all cases involving further offences which led to conviction, cautions or where prosecutions are pending 28 January 1999 to 30 September 2000

Offence	*Number*
Total	1,003
Manslaughter	0
Other homicide and attempted homicide	
Attempted murder	0
Making threats to kill	3
Conspire, aid, incite murder	0
Death by reckless driving	0
Wounding	
Wounding (inflicting GBH)	6
Assault occasioning ABH	22
Assault with intent to cause GBH	0
Assaults	
Assault with intent to resist arrest	1
Other assault	32
Obstruct/resist constable	0
Assault on police officer	24
Cruelty to children	0
Other violence against the person	
Cause explosion, place explosive	0
Possess firearms with intent	1
Possess offensive weapon	9
Other violence against the person	8
Sexual Offences	
Rape	2
Buggery	0
Indecent assault	1
Unlawful sexual intercourse	0

Breakdown of all cases involving further offences which led to conviction, cautions or where prosecutions are pending 28 January 1999 to 30 September 2000

Offence	*Number*
Abduction	0
Bigamy	0
Burglary	42
Robbery	17
Taking and driving away	13
Other theft	175
Handling stolen goods	29
Fraud	44
Forgery	4
Drugs offences	
Production	0
Supply	14
Possession with intent	7
Possession	83
Unlawful import/export	1
Other drugs offences	5
Arson	1
Criminal damage	43
In charge or driving under the influence of drink or drugs	42
Reckless driving	7
Other motoring offences	195
Drunkenness	1
Blackmail	0
Kidnapping	3
Affray	14
Violent disorder	23
Perjury/libel/pervert the course of justice	6
Threat/disorderly behaviour	6
Breach of Court Order	38
Other offences	68
Offence not recorded	13

Sentencing Policy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if, in his review of sentencing policy, extending the right of appeal against lenient sentences to include the offence of the sale of drugs to children will be considered. [134532]

Mr. Boateng: Rights of appeal, whether by the prosecution or the defence, are not within the terms of reference of the current Review of the Sentencing Framework.

However, on 24 July my hon. Friend the Minister of State announced an extension of the Attorney-General's powers to refer unduly lenient sentences to the Court of Appeal for review. From 21 August 2000, the Attorney-General has been able to refer sentences imposed for drug trafficking offences, including the offence of supplying a controlled drug. There is no separate offence of supplying drugs to children.

R *v.* CICA ex parte Embling

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement concerning the implications of R *v.* CICA ex parte Embling. [134332]

Mr. Boateng: The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Appeals Panel will naturally take account of the judgment in making determinations under the tariff-based criminal injuries compensation scheme. The Government will

consider whether greater clarification of the terms "full recovery" and "continuing disability" would be helpful in any future amendment of the scheme and its accompanying tariff of injuries.

Money Laundering

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures are presently under discussion at EU level for combating money laundering through *(a)* the Internet and *(b)* electronic currency transfers. [134810]

Mrs. Roche: A number of measures have been taken or are currently under consideration in this area.

The revision of the 1991 Money Laundering Directive in the European Union, which has recently received political agreement within the Council, is designed to ensure that all member states have sufficiently robust national laws and regulations to combat the increasingly sophisticated methods used in money laundering. As such it includes specific provisions to ensure that there is adequate identification of customers where no face-to-face contact between bank staff and customer occurs, such as through Internet banking accounts. Implementation will require the development of specific regulations and guidelines in the United Kingdom, applied to all those involved in financial transactions. This is currently being considered. It has been agreed that three years after the adoption of the Directive an examination will be undertaken to consider identification measures for clients involved in non-face-to-face transactions and the possible implications for electronic commerce.

In a separate measure, the European Union has prepared a comprehensive strategy for dealing with organised crime in a paper entitled "The Prevention and Control of Organised Crime: A European Union Strategy for the beginning of the new Millennium". The measures proposed in that document, and to be taken forward in European Union Working Groups, include a specific recommendation to address the issue of money laundering on the Internet and via electronic money products.

At the joint Council of European Union Justice and Finance Ministers on 17 October, it was agreed that a range of measures be undertaken against financial crime, with particular attention to be given to measures to facilitate the fight against the abuse of new information and communications, especially the Internet and electronic transfer of money.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will assess the benefits of introducing a fast-track procedure at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate for processing applications from non-EU foreign nationals for leave to remain in the UK when they are medically qualified people filling a vacancy for a doctor or nurse within the NHS. [135531]

Mrs. Roche: From 2 May, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate and the Department for Education and Employment have revised procedures for handling all applications for leave to remain for the purpose of employment including those from medically qualified persons seeking employment within the NHS. This has enabled such applications to be completed within 2–3 weeks instead of three months or longer.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers the UK *(a)* returned and *(b)* accepted in (i) October 1999, (ii) November 1999, (iii) December 1999, (iv) January 2000, (v) February 2000, (vi) March 2000, (vii) April 2000, (viii) May 2000, (ix) June 2000 and (x) July 2000. [136091]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested can be found in the table. We have interpreted "returned" to mean unsuccessful asylum seekers removed under port and enforcement processes, and "accepted" to mean those asylum seekers granted refugee status or refused asylum but given exceptional leave to remain.

Asylum seekers the UK returned and accepted—October 1999 to July 2000[1]

	[2]Returned	[4]Accepted
1999		
October	675	465
November	635	450
December	645	220
2000		
January	605	350
February	735	905
March	730	1,815
April	765	3,935
May	890	3,945
June	725	2,590
July	720	1,690

[1] All figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

[2] Figures relate to asylum seekers who have been removed under port and enforcement procedures.

[3] Figures include voluntary departures following enforcement action but excludes all other voluntary departures.

[4] Includes persons seeking asylum who have been granted asylum or refused asylum but given ELR.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for asylum cases considered under normal procedures, for *(a)* each of the last 10 calendar years for which figures are available and *(b)* each month in 2000 for which figures are available, (i) the number of asylum claims refused, broken down by major type of refusal and (ii) the number of asylum claims refused in each type, expressed as a proportion of the total number of refusals. [136063]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is given in the table.

The latest information on asylum is available on the Home Office internet site at http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm.

Decisions [1,2] on applications received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, by type, 1989 to 2000

Number of principal applicants

	Decisions [3]									
	Cases considered under normal procedures									
					Refusals					
	Total decisions	*Recognised as refugee and granted asylum* [4]	*Not recognised as refugee but granted exceptional leave* [5]	*Total refused*	*Refused asylum and exceptional leave after full consideration*	*Percentage*	*Refused on safe third country grounds* [6]	*Percentage*	*Refused under para. 340 of Immigration Rules* [7]	*Percentage*
1989	6,955	2,210	3,860	890	890	100	—	—	—	—
1990	4,025	920	2,400	705	705	100	—	—	—	—
1991	6,075	505	2,190	3,380	2,325	69	270	8	785	23
1992	34,900	1,115	15,325	18,465	2,675	15	595	3	15,195	82
1993	23,405	1,590	11,125	10,690	4,705	44	745	7	5,240	49
1994	20,990	825	3,660	16,500	12,655	77	865	5	2,985	18
1995	27,005	1,295	4,410	21,300	17,705	83	1,515	7	2,085	10
1996	38,960	2,240	5,055	31,670	28,040	89	1,615	5	2,015	6
1997	36,045	3,985	3,115	28,945	22,780	79	2,550	9	3,615	12
1998	31,570	5,345	3,910	22,315	17,465	78	1,855	8	2,995	14
1999[p]	33,720	7,815	2,465	11,025	8,110	74	1,830	16	1,085	10
2000[p]										
January	4,040	180	170	2,390	2,060	86	90	4	245	10
February	7,865	225	680	5,025	3,965	79	145	3	920	18
March	11,340	590	1,225	7,570	5,335	70	120	2	2,115	28
April	9,650	2,090	1,845	4,205	2,930	70	110	2	1,165	28
May	10,765	2,015	1,930	5,520	3,785	69	85	1	1,655	30
June	1,135	1,135	1,455	6,360	4,125	65	100	2	2,135	33
July	8,855	710	980	6,345	4,145	65	185	3	2,015	32
August	9,770	575	925	7,510	4,230	56	155	2	3,125	42
September	8,145	375	495	6,710	3,670	55	155	2	2,885	43

[1] Decisions do not necessarily relate to applications made in the same period

[2] Figures rounded to the nearest 5

[3] Information is of initial decisions, excluding the outcomes of appeals or other subsequent decisions

[4] Excluding South East Asian refugees (pre 1996 only)

[5] Where it would have been unreasonable or impracticable to seek to enforce return to country of origin

[6] Figures from 1 January 1991 only. Prior to this, these refusals are included in the column 'Refused asylum and exceptional leave after full consideration'.

[7] Paragraph 340 (paragraph 180F prior 1 October 1994 and paragraph 101 prior to July 1993) of the Immigration Rules, for failure to provide evidence to support the asylum claim within a reasonable period, including failure to respond to invitations to interview to establish identity: see explanatory note 6. Figures from 1 December 1991 only. Prior to this, these refusals are included in the column 'Refused asylum and exceptional leave after full consideration'.

[p] Provisional

Correspondence

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the reason for the delay by the Transfer Desk in his Department in transferring a letter regarding an immigration matter sent to him by the hon. Member for Hull, North on 5 September; what is the *(a)* average, *(b)* shortest and *(c)* greatest length of time taken for a letter to be transferred from his Department to another department; and if he will make a statement. [136026]

Mr. Straw: I apologise for the delay in dealing with the letter sent by the hon. Member. This was referred to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate immediately upon its receipt in the Home Office on 5 September. That Directorate subsequently advised that the correspondence would more appropriately be dealt with by the Joint Entry Clearance Unit. Unfortunately, the transfer to that Unit was not completed until 25 October. This was due to a recent and regrettable failure of our normal procedures, which we have since rectified.

Prior to that failure, in the current year, of all the letters requiring transfer to other Government Departments, 54 per cent. were transferred within five working days; 15 per cent. in 5 to 10 days; 13 per cent. in 10 to 20 days and 18 per cent. in over 20 days. The average was 13 days. I do not regard these periods as acceptable.

Fuel Protests

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans have been drawn up by his task force to deal with a recurrence of fuel protests; how many times the task force has met; what its membership is; and if he will make a statement. [136066]

Mr. Straw: The Fuel Task Force has met four times so far. For further details I refer the right hon. Member to my reply to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) on 24 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 115–16W, and to my statement today.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to deploy armed forces personnel in the event of a recurrence of fuel protests; what functions they will perform; what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence concerning these plans; and if he will make a statement. [136062]

Mr. Straw: I refer the right hon. Member to my reply to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) on 24 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 115–16W, to replies made by the Minister for the Armed Forces during MOD oral questions on 30 October, and to my statement today.

R *v.* CICA ex parte Leatherland

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement concerning the implications of R *v.* CICA ex parte Leatherland. [134331]

Mr. Boateng: Following the "Leatherland judgment", the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority will provide fuller explanations for their decisions in appropriate cases.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Fertiliser Prices

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what investigation his Department is undertaking into the recent rise in fertiliser prices. [135675]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 31 October 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

Although the Department of Trade and Industry monitors price levels for fertilisers, competition investigations are generally matters for the Office of Fair Trading (OFT). We are aware that the OFT has received complaints from farmers and their representatives about the prices of fertilisers in the UK. It is now awaiting submission from interested parties in order to determine whether a formal investigation is needed.

BSE

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the most recent figures for confirmed BSE cases broken down by year of birth. [136913]

Ms Quin: The position as at 30 October 2000 was as follows:

Year of birth	*Total number of confirmed cases*
1974	1
1975	0
1976	2
1977	10
1978	6
1979	41
1980	101
1981	261
1982	1,393
1983	4,461
1984	8,067
1985	11,065
1986	19,732
1987	36,869
1988	22,186
1989	12,645
1990	5,640
1991	4,575
1992	3,155
1993	2,359
1994	1,206
1995	294
1996	[1]3
1997	0
1998	0
1999	0
Unknown	43,345
Total	177,416

[1] A third case of BSE in an animal born in 1996 was confirmed on 30 October 2000. The animal was born in May 1996, before the feed ban is considered to have been fully effective.

Helen Jackson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action the Government are taking to prepare in the event that BSE is present in the United Kingdom sheep flock. [136933]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Government are adopting a precautionary approach and have for some time been operating a risk reduction strategy in this area in line with advice from SEAC and, more recently, the Food Standards Agency. This includes an ongoing research programme, including development of rapid screening methods, a national scrapie plan to eliminate scrapie from the national sheep flock (on which the Government initiated consultation in August) and the removal of the specified risk material from the food chain.

Genotypically susceptible sheep dosed orally with infected brain material from cattle have developed BSE in scientific experiments. To date, however, BSE is not known to have occurred naturally in sheep, although this possibility is being checked by an ongoing research programme. The Government have in hand preparation of a contingency plan setting out actions that might be taken in different scenarios if in the future BSE is found to be present in sheep.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make arrangements to permit researchers seeking to provide a live test for bovine spongiform encephalopathy to have access to BSE diagnosed cattle. [135202]

Ms Quin: Arrangements are already in place to provide tissues and body fluids from cattle with BSE and cattle incubating the disease. The Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) holds an archive of material from BSE-infected cattle. Scientists may apply directly to the TSE Office at the VLA to request samples of these tissues for use in research. Applications are approved by the TSE Research and Surveillance Unit in MAFF on the basis of the supplies available and the merit of the research. Scientists also need to show that they have the containment facilities available to perform the research and any necessary Home Office or import licences. Where sufficient supplies exist, reasonable requests will be granted and the tissues will be released once funding for the research is secured.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many of the research projects submitted to the 1996 open competition to find a diagnostic test for bovine spongiform encephalopathy produced a live test; and if he will make a statement. [135083]

Ms Quin: All of the projects funded as a result of the 1996 open competition have finished. None has resulted in the development of a test that can be used in the live animal. One project has resulted in a diagnostic test (called DELFIA) which has been submitted for validation by the EU Commission. Tests which pass the EU assessment may be used in national surveillance schemes. This test uses brain samples and so can be used only on dead animals. MAFF is now funding the assessment at Ames in the United States. The test is performed on blood samples and early results suggest that it can diagnose sheep with scrapie. MAFF is funding its further development as a diagnostic test in the live animal.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many of the unfunded proposals submitted in 1996 to the open competition for a diagnostic test for bovine spongiform encephalopathy were developed further; and if he will make a statement. [135078]

Ms Quin: To our knowledge, none of the unfunded proposals submitted under the 1996 open competition has resulted in a diagnostic test that can be used in the live animal. Swiss researchers who submitted a proposal under the competition have since developed a test called the Prionics test. However, this is not the same test as that submitted under the open competition. The Prionics test has been assessed by the EU Commission and has met their criteria. The test is currently being used in abattoir surveys of cattle in Switzerland and France. It is also used in the UK for the confirmation of clinical cases. This test uses brain tissue and cannot be used in the live animal.

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many cases have been brought before the courts in each of the last five years relating to breaches of regulations relating to BSE. [135279]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* There were no cases brought before the courts in the calendar year 1995 relating to breaches of regulations and orders relating to BSE. For the years 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999 the figures are:

Regulations	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Fresh Meat (Hygiene and Inspection Regulations 1995	3	6	16	14
Fresh Meat (Beef Control) No. 2 Regulations 1996	0	0	1	0
Specified Bovine Offal Order 1995	4	1	0	0
Specified Bovine Material Order 1996	2	2	0	0
Specified Bovine Material Order 1997	0	0	3	0
Specified Risk Material Regulations 1997	0	0	7	11
Totals	9	9	27	25

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food ceased to have responsibility for bringing such cases before the courts at the beginning of April of this year.

Additionally, there were 12 cases in 1998 and 84 cases in 1999 where applications were made to the magistrates for orders relating to the disposal of goods ineligible for export.

Other authorities may also have been responsible for bringing cases before the courts.

Cereals Producers

Helen Jackson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make an application for agrimonetary compensation for cereals producers. [136932]

Mr. Nick Brown: In view of the very difficult trading conditions faced by UK arable farmers, the Government have decided to ask the EU Commission to draw down £34 million of the optional agrimonetary compensation available this year. This is in addition to the £57 million agrimonetary compensation already announced for this autumn. The extra money will provide valuable assistance to the arable sector at an exceptionally difficult time and follows a series of discussions with NFU leaders about the present problems of the arable sector.

Organic Farming

Ms Drown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to complete the review of the organic farming scheme. [136914]

Mr. Morley: The review of the organic farming scheme was launched in December 1999 and is now completed. I am grateful to all those individuals and organisations who contributed to it. A note summarising the outcome of the review has been placed in the Library.

We have carefully considered the extent to which changes needed to be made to the scheme, which was heavily oversubscribed after it opened in April 1999 as a much improved replacement for the previous conversion aid arrangements. We believe that the priority is to reopen the organic farming scheme as quickly as possible, and accordingly we will begin accepting applications from 2 January 2001, with the first new payments being made in April 2001.

The organic farming scheme is now part of the England rural development programme, and its future operation will be reviewed as part of the programme's mid-term evaluation. Many of the issues raised during this year's review will be relevant to that evaluation, and we will ensure that they are taken into account at that time.

Against this background, one change is being made to the scheme when it reopens, subject to parliamentary approval. To facilitate applications, we propose to extend the deadline for applying for aid under the scheme after registration with an organic inspection body from three months to six months.

Farmers (Support)

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list chronologically the actions taken since 1997 to provide support for farmers, by way of *(a)* extra cash, *(b)* policy initiatives and *(c)* promotion of agricultural products. [135393]

Ms Quin: The Government are committed to developing a framework within which the farming industry can continue to adapt to change. Since May 1997,

we have introduced a number of policy measures, injecting £670 million (excluding agrimonetary aid) into the industry. These measures include:

Early 1998

We introduced several initiatives offering extra support to farmers, not all of which cost money, but which in total were worth more than £150 million to the industry. We:

(i) paid £85 million in agrimonetary compensation to suckler cow and sheep producers at the beginning of the year;

(ii) supported the introduction of an EU private storage aid scheme for pigmeat in the face of a fall of about 50 per cent. in the producer price of pigs. Additional action was taken in Northern Ireland;

(iii) relaxed rules on the moisture content of cereals eligible for purchase intervention, in recognition of the difficulties caused to cereals producers by the wet summer;

(iv) successfully lobbied the EC to grant two blocks of private storage aid for sheepmeat to help move lamb on the market. With effect from 8 October we removed the obstacles to the export of whole sheep carcases to France;

(v) successfully negotiated the introduction of the Export Certified Herds Scheme in Northern Ireland;

(vi) persuaded the EC to increase beef premium advances from 60 per cent. to 80 per cent.;

(vii) met the costs for one year of Meat Hygiene Service enforcement of controls on specified risk material from cattle and sheep;

(viii) met the start up and first year running costs of the new Cattle Tracing System.

16 November 1998

Announcement of a further aid package of £120 million, to provide:

(i) extra agrimonetary compensation in the form of supplementary payments under the Suckler Cow Premium Scheme;

(ii) increased payments under the Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances Scheme (£60 million);

(iii) extension of the Calf Processing Scheme until the end of the financial year.

July 1999

We successfully negotiated the introduction of the Date-Based Export Scheme for eligible British beef from 1 August.

20 September 1999

£150 million in new money announced:

(i) £89 million in deferral of charges for inspections of specified risk material from cattle and sheep carcases and for cattle passports until 2002–03;

(ii) £60 million in HLCA;

(iii) £1 million in marketing support.

28 October 1999

Announcement of £15 million in new money:

(i) £5 million in marketing support;

(ii) £10 million for organic farming;

Plus:

(iii) Review of regulatory burdens in agriculture: three industry-led working groups reported in December 1999 on three priority areas identified by the industry: IACS and Inspections, Intervention and Meat Hygiene and Slaughterhouse Rules. Government accepted 98 of the 107 recommendations made. In addition a number of other issues identified for review have been considered in bilateral discussions between MAFF and industry. Implementation of the recommendations is a priority under the Action Plan for Farming.

1 December 1999

We pegged Meat Hygiene Charges: charges for 1999–2000 held at 1998–99 levels.

7 December 1999

Announced 'New Direction for Agriculture', including £1.6 billion (over seven years) England and Rural Development Plan. £300 million of which is new money. The Plan (now 'Programme') was approved by the European Commission's Star Committee in September 2000, and launched on 3 October 2000.

1 February 2000

Original labels on food: Following consultation, tough new guidance notes were issued on 1 February to industry and enforcement authorities. These make clear the need to ensure origin labels on food are unambiguous. They emphasise the need to pay special attention to the wording of origin and other declarations when the country of final processing of a food and the source of its main ingredients may be confused.

30 March 2000

Farming Summit: The Government launched the Action Plan for Farming, supported by £200 million. The Plan will provide financial relief to the hardest-hit sectors to help ease the process of change. Other commitments are directed towards rural development and diversification, better regulation, improved food chain co-operation, making the best of IT opportunities and continued commitment to CAP reform.

The 2000 Spending Review provides a further £300 million to carry forward initiatives under the plan over the next three years.

Agriculture (Diversification)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what incentives are available to encourage diversification within the agricultural industry. [135236]

Mr. Morley: The England Rural Development Programme, launched on 3 October, contains a range of measures to encourage diversification within the agricultural industry in England. The Rural Enterprise Scheme will fund farm diversification projects. The Processing and Marketing Grant, Energy Crops Scheme, woodland grants and Vocational Training Scheme will also support diversification. The Ministry of Agriculture will also be producing a guide on farm diversification which will list these and other sources of funding and advice.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales will be able to provide details of grant schemes operating in Wales.

North Sea Fishing

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which countries are excluded from North Sea fishing grounds until 31 December 2002 through accession treaties; how many vessels will subsequently have right of access; and if he will make a statement on the consequences for UK vessel access. [135553]

Mr. Morley: Under the relevant accession treaties, all Finnish, Spanish and Portuguese fishing vessels are excluded from fishing in the North Sea until 31 December 2002. As things currently stand, they will be able to fish for non-quota stocks only thereafter. UK vessel access to the North Sea will not be affected.

Knacker Industry

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many establishments were closed within the knacker industry in each of the last 10 years. [135142]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 October 2000]:* This information is not held centrally as it was only in April 1999, when the Animal By-Products Order 1999 (ABPO 1999) came into force, that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food assumed responsibility for approving knackers yards. However, since 1 April 1999 four knackers yards have closed.

Beef Exports

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the policy of the French Government towards UK beef exports. [135672]

Ms Quin: The French Government have made it clear that they do not intend to lift their ban on imports of UK beef. The European Commission is challenging this ban in the European Court of Justice.

Farming Employees

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* farmsteads and *(b)* workers employed in the farming industry there are in Barnsley, East and Mexborough. [136101]

Ms Quin: The Agricultural and Horticultural census indicated that there were 117 main holdings in the Barnsley, East and Mexborough constituency in June 1999, with a total labour force of 342.

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OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES — **VOLUME 355**

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Printed indexes to Hansard

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- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
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- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
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- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
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Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
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- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
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- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
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  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting or is a written question.
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  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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